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Alcohol Reference
Mild Language
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Stats that!



The results are in! Having wrapped up our initial third-party research (and made someone $500 richer), I'd like to share some of the more surprising results with you. I'd also like to thank everyone who participated. We had a great turn out, and this survey is already making a difference out there in the world of **play**. For one thing, few really believed us when we claimed that we were penetrating a more mature, active, avid gamer/consumer, so we were stoked when the statistics came back showing the average age of our readers at 26 (60%+ of which even have high speed internet access!). 95% own computers (83% PC, 7% Mac and 10% both), 94% own DVD players, 35% flat screens and 71% components such as peripheral tuners. On the entertainment menu, 64% read comics, 55% read manga (right on) and 61% go to the movies at least twice a month (with 87% preferring action-adventure, second to fantasy sci-fi at 87%). 63% buy three or more DVDs per month and 59% still buy at least three music CDs a month, preferring alternative, rock, metal and hip hop, in that order. One of the coolest results, however, is that few of you have succumbed to the mind-numbing rigors of the Big Three! Your number-one TV network is Fox, followed closely by Cartoon Network and Comedy Central. Okay, so NBC nudged in at fourth; I like looking at Brooke Burns just as much as the next guy (if not more). MTV was up there as well. 88% watch anime, a massive turnout likely due to features like *Ghost in the Shell*, *Spirited Away, Cowboy Bebop* and the like, with 59% buying three or more anime DVDs a month. Hardly anyone smokes anymore, half of you like a drink now again (bottoms up!) and 55% watch pro sports.

Now for the gaming side. The console breakdown is cross-over heavy; around 60% own all three consoles as well as a GBA and a PS One. The leader, though, is the PS2, at 76%, followed by the Xbox and GameCube, which are neck and neck in the 60% range, with another 19% looking to purchase an Xbox within 90 days and 16% looking to buy a GameCube. So, by next year the vast majority of our core readers will likely own all three consoles. On the genre breakdown, the top five are action-adventure with 94%, role playing with 82%, FPS with 76%, fighting with 71%, platforming with 70%, and arcade at 59%, just edging out racing and sports. 49% play online, and you spend on the average of 15-20 hours a week playing games. Conclusion: this magazine has an amazing core readership. We weren't sure it could be done when we set out less than two years ago, but with this foundation to build on, we're confident that world domination is at hand. Anyone seen Mini-Me?

Perhaps the coolest stat of all was that print influences your purchases 59% versus 24% via the internet. Now, while I'm sure that had something to do with the fact that this was a magazine survey, it bodes well for our employment status until **play** goes digital someday, which probably isn't too far off.

In the meantime, it's been a great year so far, but the best is yet to come. With Q4 upon us, we're closing in on the likes of Sudeki, Voodoo Vince, FF Crystal Chronicles, FF X-2, Half-Life 2, Ratchet and Clank 2, Jak II, Castlevania LoI, TMNT, Ninja Gaiden, Billy Hatcher, Viewtiful Joe, Maximo vs. Army of Zin, Dino Crisis 3 and a few surprises like the GTA alternative Simpsons Hit 'n Run, Armed and Dangerous, the new Buffy game (all three of which you'll find in this very issue) and, well, as they say, many, many more. You'll find them all here, in all of their glory in the months ahead.

Dave Halverson Editor-in-chief
dhalverson@playmagazine.com

Editorial

Editor In Chief	**Dave Halverson**
Editorial Director	**Brady Fiechter**
Editorial Assistant	**Christina Alexander**
Copy Editor / Contributing Writer	**Chris Hoffman**
Editor At Large / Technology Editor	**Tom Ham**
Music Editor	**Lucas Mast**

Design

Art Director	**Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director	**Nelson Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher	**Michael Eisenberg**
Contact	**Michael Eisenberg** sales@playmagazine.com Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102 Fax 818.707.7212
Entertainment Advertising Director	**Bill Cooley**
Account Executive	**Kimberly Ratican** kratican@playmagazine.com
Newsstand Manager	**Howard White** hwhite9611@aol.com 508.984.5085

Corporate

Director Of Operations	**Julie Halverson** jhalverson@playmagazine.com 818.707.7786 ext.104
Administrative Assistant	**Christina Alexander** calexander@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions And Customer Service
888.922.6122
e-mail: playquest@mcmillencomm.com

play magazine Offices
Fusion Publishing, Inc.
29229 Canwood St., Suite 200
Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 2, Issue 9. Application to mail at Periodicals Postage Rate is Pending at Agoura Hills, CA and at additional mailing offices. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $34.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PLAY , P.O. Box 500, Missouri City, TX 77459 or e-mail: playcoa@mcmillencomm.com For subscription service questions, call (888)922-6122. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax]. © Fusion Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved, Play™, Fusion Publishing™, Play: Girls of Gaming™, Play: The Calendar™, Fusion Publishing Presents™ are trademarks and copyrights of Fusion Publishing, Inc.™ and © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes.

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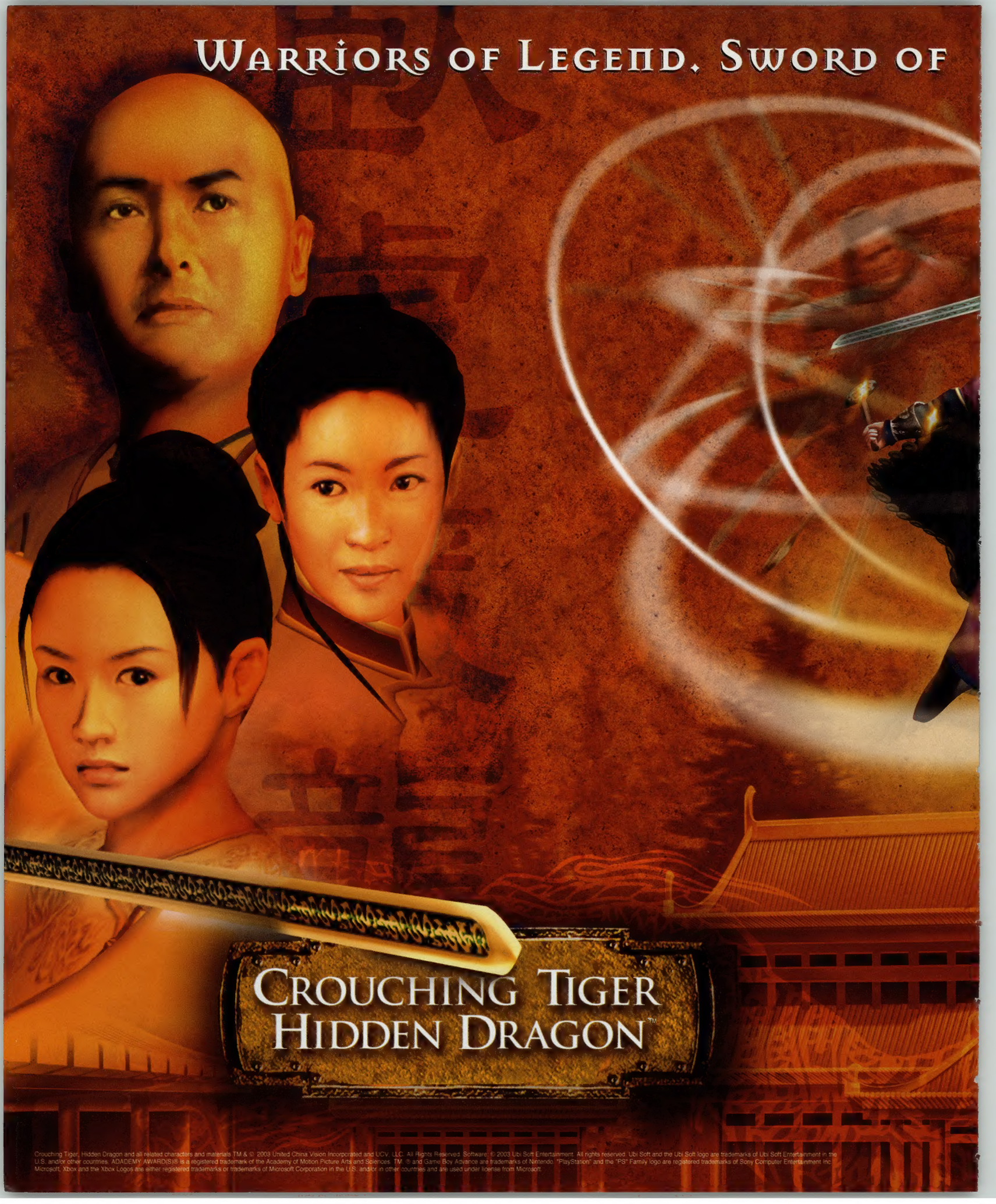
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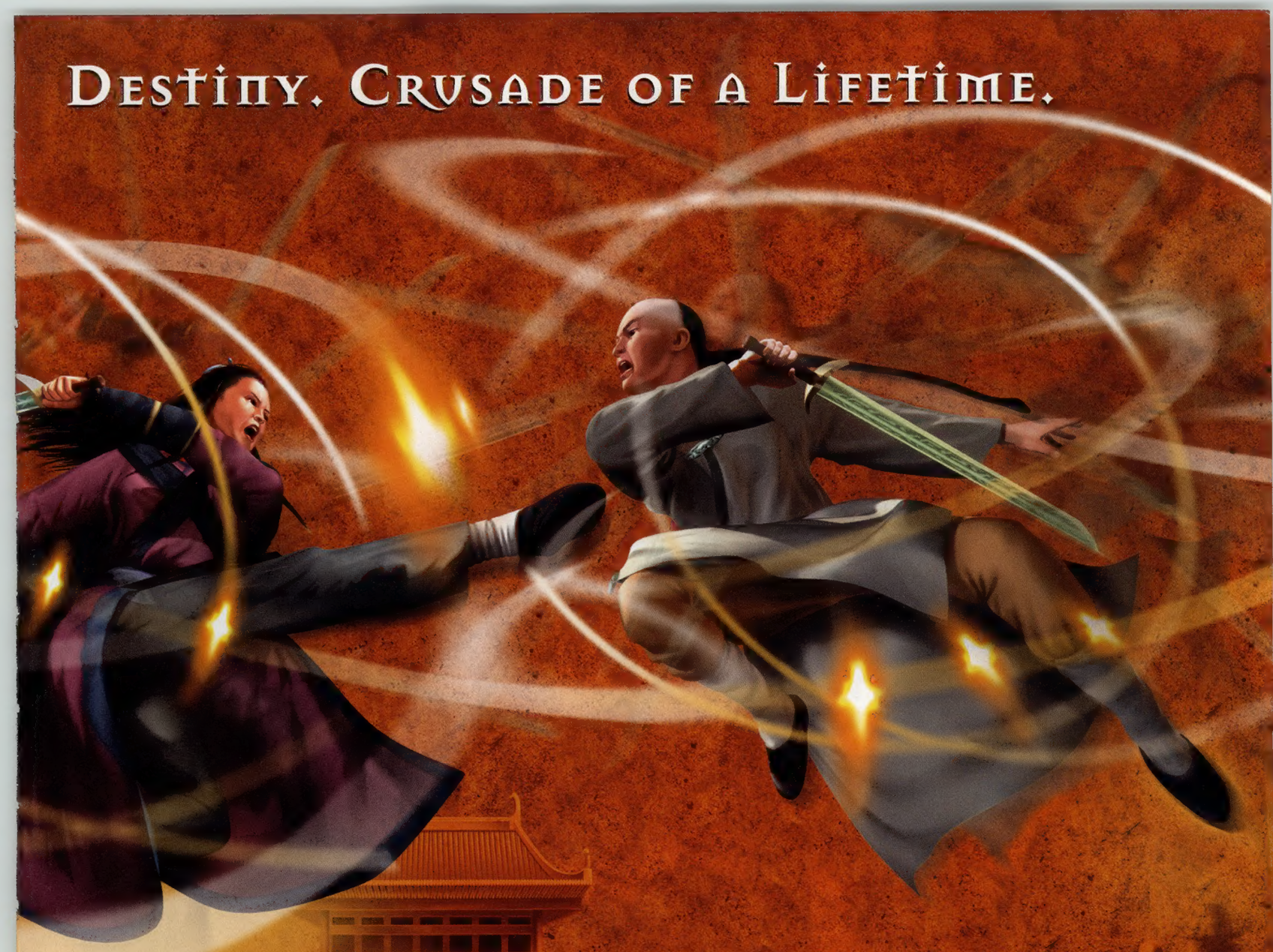
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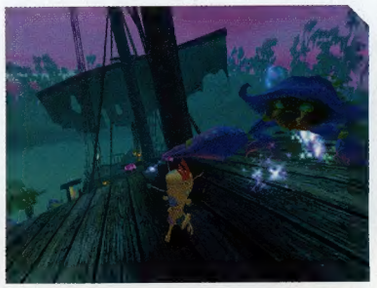
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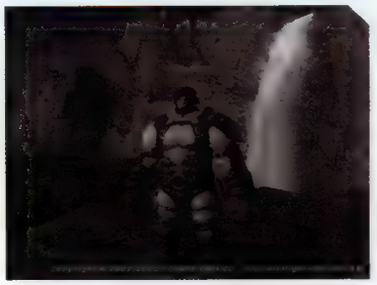
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PIRANHA
Gunner thinks that his mines will work on me! No way, I can sideslip his mines!
GUNNER
Just wait t'ill they get to this corner where I just dropped two mines!
Arg! Lost traction on the road and drove in the river. I need the helicopter to get me out!
JACK SPEED
If Jack Speed comes up from behind, I'll deploy my scorcher!
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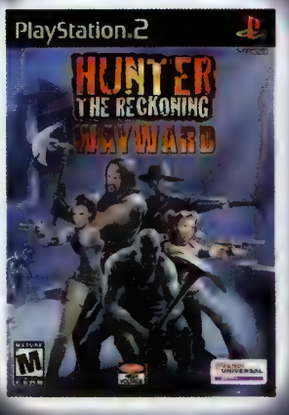
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Letter of the month!

Hey **play**,
My old man is a huge John Wayne fan. A few years back, they were running adverts with the Duke's weathered facade, pimping beer to the masses. My dad was pretty pissed, as were many people. The whole thing stunk of crass commercialism, and helped to re-affirm my faith in the entertainment industry at large (dirty sons of bitches to the last man). But I shrugged, said "that's life," and moved on.

Now, I'm not an online junkie, so the initial buzz passed me by. But I've recently heard about the live-action Evangelion movie, and I'm not sure I'll be able to shrug this off so easily. Leave it to America to take something sacred and whore it out for a few bucks. Really, does anyone think this has a snowball's chance in hell of not sucking? A twenty-six episode series, not to mention the two movies, all condensed into a 90-minute experience. I don't know if I should laugh or cry. Of course, being Hollywood, I'm sure they'll stock it full of overrated, pompous asses (Val Kilmer, for instance). I can see it now: Jennifer Jason-Leigh as Misato! Keanu Reeves as Kaji! Quentin Tarantino as Shinji's father (I'm positive that he could eclipse his towering performance in "Dusk 'till Dawn," provided his personal secretary's babysitter got a trailer as well)! Of course, why stop at Eva? Why not tackle Lupin while they're at it! Granted, it has a better chance of being decent (though no one, and I repeat, **no one** can hope to fill the shoes of Daisuke Jigen), but Hollywood has a good chance of screwing it up. Heck, get Joel Schumacher on it. If it has to stink, at least let it stink grandly. Okay, I took a deep breath, balanced my humors (for the record, I have no idea what that means, but it must be good), said "that's life," and moved on. Not so much because I've run out of nasty things to say about Hollywood, but I still have some questions to ask. In no particular order:

1) Why did Nintendo drop Doshin the Giant? The game sounded bad-ass. Is it possible that some kindly third-party may pick it up?

2) Will we ever see another proper Phantasy Star? Don't get me wrong; I do like PSO, but I would also like to see the main series continue.

3) I recently bought Metal Slug 3 for PS2 and thought, "Boy, is it nice not having to pay $300 to play this game." Will Playmore follow suit and release Metal Slug 4 on the PS2 as well?

Oh, and on a completely un-related side note, I was playing Wario World (Screaming "Bolischoy Tavieda!" as Wario busted out a Zangief-style spinning piledriver) when I suddenly realized "this engine would be perfect for a new Bonk game." Might we see GC Genjin if the Hudson re-release does well?

Take it easy,
Zach L.

Live action Evangelion, yes, it is a sin, but one already on its way to perpetration.

"Does anyone think [the live-action Evangelion movie] has a snowball's chance in hell of not sucking?

God help us. If they f--- with Lupin, I'm coming after them, whoever they are.

Now for those answers....
Sadly, there's no word on Doshin, but if Animal Leader (Cubivore) can make it, then Doshin might stand a chance. We'll keep you posted. Ah, the Phantasy Star question...one near to my heart. PSO is awesome but...it's not really a "Phantasy Star" game as we've come to know and love them. My only guess is that Sega just doesn't like money. I mean, the new Vectorman is a joke...but why Vectorman in the first place, from the company that owns Golden Axe, Alex Kidd, Alicia Dragoon, Streets of Rage, NiGHTS, Shining in the Darkness, and Vermillion, and has Wild Riders and Daytona USA 2 ready made? They just hate money; always have. As for Metal Slug, 4 is on its way! SNK is back in the USA.

Bloody Good Letter

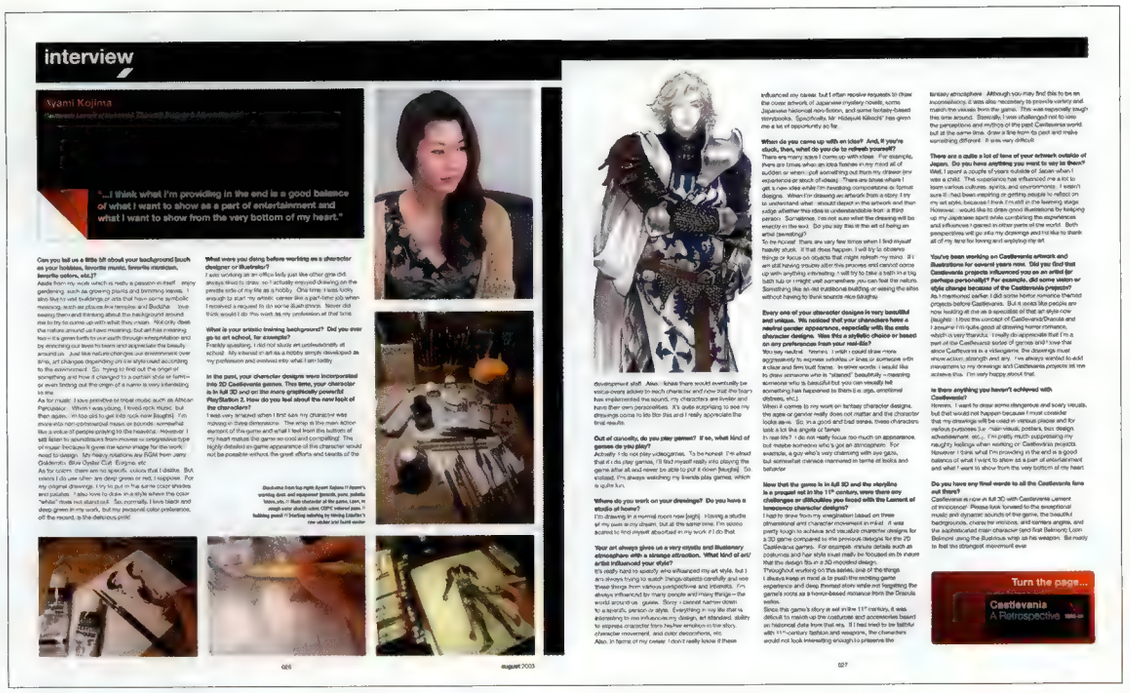
Hey,
I think you are right with every word written in your Blood Money article. It is true, that a little blood and gore is fine, but when you need so much that a movie conversion would be impossible for lack of a budget sufficient to create all of the bloody effects, I think you have gone too far. And it is a fact that nudity is more natural than a whole lot else next to nature itself, that is why I am confused by America. We are said to be the best country on the planet, and yet we treat criminals better than many natural citizens that are kind hearted and just want two dollars for a drink. The two drugs that are legal are chemically made but plants that abound on the earth are illegal. And it is a FACT that alcohol and cigarettes kill MORE than crack, coke and heroine COMBINED. There is a hole in the ozone layer (THE SHIT THAT HOLDS THE AIR IN) that we don't do anything about for fear of losing air conditioning for two days and the government doesn't say anything about it so that they can tax gas power for even longer. That is the perfect country we live in. So I say to the politicians that attack video games [like] this, "Look around, shut up." Oh, and by the way, definitely go with a clean cover.

Thanks,
Vince

Double standards and all, we love our country all the same and we're all grateful to be free (well, semi-free at least), however, these are problems that our generation needs to fix. Once the current hierarchy moves on, my hope is that the next wave will see their way clear to doing what's right, not what keeps them in office, and evoke real change. The injustice being perpetrated on our citizens is beyond wrong when each Friend gets a million an episode people should not be starving or without medical care. It's just gotten all out of whack. The first real man or woman to stand up and really lead will start the roll. It'll probably be someone who grew up playing games given the size of the industry so let's hope he or she is growing up on Final Fantasy rather than Vice City!

Married with Castlevania

I just got the August issue of **play** in today. Ever since it hit newsstands at our local multimedia store, I've looked forward to each and every issue. This month, I was VERY excited to see one of Ayami Kojima's beautiful Castlevania illustrations on the cover. I've been a die-hard Castlevania fan ever since I played Simon's Quest, but nothing hit me like Symphony of the Night did... or Miss Kojima's illustrations. Over the past two years and counting, I have sent emails periodically to both U.S. and Japan Konami centers pleading for any information they have about Miss Kojima or her artwork... and every time... no response. To actually get to read more of "her side" of the creative process was a real treat. I don't think I can stress how many years I have been chasing down rumors of art books, illustration collections, etc. of hers to no avail. (Web searches on anything with "Kojima" in the title usually bring up Metal Gear Solid websites.) Most gaming websites list her only as a footnote to a game review, when her illustrations have become so iconic of these later games. Thank you so much for concentrating on so many aspects of what has become such an all-encompassing media!


interview

Ayami Kojima

"...I think what I'm providing in the end is a good balance of what I want to show as a part of entertainment and what I want to show from the very bottom of my heart."

PS- Nice product placement in the new "Runaway Jury" movie! I managed to spot an issue of **play** magazine on a desk in the movie preview at the theatres the other day.

~~Becky (A married "chick" gamer, at that!)

We were as happy and honored to do it as you were to reading it, so thank you! It was the very definition of "labor of love" for all of us. Married "chick" gamers rock, by the way.

Just beat it

Hello to the wonderful employees of **play**,
Just wanted to say that I picked up this month's copy of **play** and was surprised (pleasantly) to find you had published my letter to you about Zelda. I've written in to many game mags but yours is the first to ever actually put my stuff in print. I just wanted to say thanks. It just gives me those warm fuzzy feelings inside to know you do read letters sent to your mag.

But since I'm writing in I guess I'll ask a question. I've always wondered if you get a chance to complete games fully before doing up a review. I know I've read reviews for games in many magazines that seem to cover the first couple hours of a game but have no bearing on the tail end. Just something I was thinking about because I just finished Xenosaga, and was rather disappointed in the game, not just the ending but overall it felt wrong and poorly done. Like it didn't live up to its potential. Every review I read for it praised it and yet just seems hollow near the last couple of dungeons; anyway, curious for your thoughts.

Thanks again,
Ken

I know for a fact Chris beat Xenosaga—he even liked the cheesy ending song. The key might be that he reviewed the game knowing it was "Episode 1" and dealt with dangling plot threads accordingly. As a rule, we try to beat games that require doing so in order to evaluate them correctly, which accounts for most of what we review. Straight puzzle games, pinball, or the odd dancing game, for instance, can be summed up after a few hours of play. I also won't beat a game that absolutely sucks so bad it can't possibly improve; you can see where they're headed in a couple of levels. Some games just say "I'm bad, I'm bad, I'm really, really bad" from the outset; yet we'll still play them for hours looking for a glimmer of hope. Otherwise, yes, we rip 'em apart, and never, ever, under any circumstances, use cheats or strategy guides.

"My copy [of play] was bought from the Army Air Force Exchange service PX on Camp Victory Iraq in Baghdad!"

play in Iraq!

I recently picked up an issue of **play** and read the letter from the editor where he stated he hoped to post the first issue of **play** sold in free Iraq. I doubt that I bought the first copy but you have your wish. My copy was bought from the Army Air Force Exchange service PX on Camp Victory Iraq in Baghdad! I am stationed with the 59th Military Police Company on Camp Victory in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I bought the magazine mainly because of a lack of reading material here but I was impressed at how well the magazine is put together, and the artwork is awesome. Enclosed please find my check for a one-year subscription. I'd never seen **play** and don't subscribe to any gaming magazines. I do now.

Sincerely,
Sergeant Wayne C. Coulter
59th Military Police Company
Unit #91439

Greetings,
My name is Jason Chavis, I'm a Lance Corporal in the Marines and I am currently stationed in Kuwait. I wanted to thank you for making such a killer magazine. I've been a reader since the very first issue and I was so overjoyed to finally see someone publish a magazine about anime and video games, both of which I love very much. After reading the latest issue, I'm always looking forward to the release of the next. I have a few questions though, that I was wondering if you can answer for me:

1) Are press and celebrities the only ones allowed at the E3 shows?

2) In your July issue, at the beginning of the anime section, there is a picture of a group of cute girls, the very voluptuous one resting her breasts on some lucky kid's head. What anime is that?! I've been wracking my brain trying to figure it out.

3) I know the Phantasy Star series is coming to a close, but do you know if Sega has plans to revive the Shining Force series?

4) Is there a Battletoads or Killer Instinct in the Xbox's future?

5) Last question. I've been a loyal fan of Nintendo, since the beginning, and stuck with it through the tough times of the N64. Now we come to the GameCube, which has had some really awesome titles out but is still lacking in some hardcore third-party support. Now don't get me wrong, Capcom and Sega are making some great games for the Cube (I'm definitely buying P.N.03). But I want your honest opinion, aside from the occasional hit that Nintendo gets, and with their release of their new system before their competitors, does it seem like they are slowly but surely being left behind by Sony and Microsoft. I want to believe otherwise but Nintendo continues to focus on the younger generation when nowadays it's the youths and adults that are the major consumers (especially us Marines). I'm afraid that Nintendo will eventually succumb to its younger competitors and take up residence on the sidelines, like Sega.

Thanks for your time, and congrats on an amazing magazine!

Jason Chavis

Of course these are the kinds of letters we live for. To know that we can bring some entertainment to the troops is a humbling notion. With any luck there's no shortage of Game Boy SPs over there... We wish you Godspeed and thank you from the bottoms of our hearts for your service to our country... Now to the questions: E3 is for retailers, game makers, press, celebs, and the thousands who sneak in under the cover of all of the above by fabricating credentials; The anime babes in question are from Mahoramatic: Automatic Maiden; and Shining Force (actually anything Shining) is off Sega's radar as they are looking to reposition the company... As for Battletoads, my personal dream game for Xbox, Rare says not to count it out, but Killer Instinct might be tricky due to red tape... They didn't say "no" though!

Damn Us

DAMN YOU PLAY.
The above statement was brought on by the realization that I will very likely wind up subscribing to your magazine, and thus will have to take on a job. *sigh*

Secondly, in response to Sascha Lichtenstein's letter in your August issue (the one titled "It's about Time"): The difficulty with actually coming out and saying that video games are, in their own right, art, stems from several things—not the least of which was the fact, which you mentioned, that video games are still seen as being oriented towards a young market. However, I do not feel that this is the only problem. Video games, unlike virtually all "accepted" forms of art, are interactive. Paintings are not interactive. Music is not interactive. Theatre is, in general, not interactive. Thus, the experience provided by video games is unique. While you may be playing the same game, you are not playing the same game—that is to say, you do not share the same play experience with someone else who has played. While this is considered a strength of the medium, it also renders quantifying the experience difficult. Beethoven's Ninth is the same every time; Devil May Cry is not. Another factor is the

trans-medium experience of video gaming; most "great art"—with the exception of theatre and the occasional film—only caters to a single sense. So, yes, while video games may, in fact, be art, the chances of anyone ever agreeing on them being art are slim—not because of any failings in the games themselves, but because of the breadth of possibility within the games themselves. Unfortunate, yes—but more or less inevitable.

Third: Unless Heat Guy J has Yoko Kanno doing the music, there's no freakin' way it'll be as cool as Cowboy Bebop. The music *MADE* Cowboy Bebop. Spike just wouldn't be Spike if it weren't for Tank! and Piano Black, dammit.

Fourth: Vanessa Z. Schneider is freakin' hot.

Last: I, too, am 18; I look forward to seeing what changes will be wrought in the gaming spectrum—and, perhaps, wreaking some myself. That is all. Carry on, Citizen.

-KP

First: Jobs are a good thing, as long as they're fun. Second: great points, all of them. Third: It's not Yoko Kanno, but as cool relating to the anime, I'm telling you Heat Guy J is that good. Fourth: Vanessa Z. Schneider is indeed God's gift, and lastly: wreak on!

All in the family

First off, bravo to you and your magazine for presenting modern video games in a thoughtful, artistic, and clear manner. The editorials contain actual respectable perspectives, the artistic aspects of the games are eye-popping, and they are both framed in the perfect layout: gestalt with flare. We have had many game magazine subscriptions over the years and this easily takes the gold.

Mr. Halverson, I especially appreciate your insightful opening column. You and your staff continually raise the issues that, I believe, are on the minds of mentally active gamers.

In response to your August issue opening editorial, your comment about the general morality of Americans is spot on. Most of us are indeed naked and sexual creatures (that's how we got here right?) but most of us do not kill or maim regularly and it's obvious which is more accepted. I see no problem with the idea of including sexual content in games or anywhere else, but I do see a problem with the implementation. When the sexuality idea gets thrown around some seem to forget that there are two sexes in this world, both of which play games (and read your magazine). The inclusion of sexuality only goes as far as objectifying an "ideal" female body and attitude, both of which are unrealistic. I will avoid citing malleable statistics and state that most perceive that female gamers are not in the majority and thus it is not warranted to express a balanced sexual viewpoint. I understand that companies sell to their target demographic but I question that business practice when you exclude half of the potential population for your games and publications. I credit The Sims' success not only to the attraction of innovative game design but also to the even playership of the sexes.

Thanks for the wonderful magazine and for sticking to your morals. My wish is that when you are formulating your ideas for the issues to come, you keep in mind that my wife is reading **play**, and our neighbor Cheryl, and our younger sisters, and many more females.

And now if you'll excuse me, I have to help her recover from a Wario Ware seizure. Very serious.

Jesse Lee Houston

P.S. Thanks for your recommendation of Gunvalkyrie. We love it

Roger that Jesse, great points. With any luck, people like you being vocal will make the difference. If nothing else, knowing there's an alternative to lowering themselves to the lowest common denominator will give game makers the fortitude to stay the course until this bloody fascination is pushed back into the fantasy realm. As for the Wario seizure, you're-a on your own! And thanks a lot, you've just made me start another game of Gunvalkyrie... Kelly, here I come!

The way it is

"Why aren't developers pushing the sexual envelope to cash in rather than the violence envelope?

"You can show graphic death on TV but not nudity..." This IS the reason the developers aren't pushing it. Death and gore—OK. Sex or nudity—NOT OK. I'm not saying it's right, it's just the way it is. This is where the Europeans are faaaaaar more sensible than we are (generally speaking). Also, with regard to the other question: lots of cover lines or clean? If clean means the absence of the black banner, then my vote goes for clean.

Regards,
Michael

True, but they don't shave their armpits; we need to fix that. Otherwise, you're spot-on.

Funny how fun, fun is

I am 23 years old, and I have been reading video game magazines regularly for the past 12 years. I also find what I can on the internet, but aside from what's on a few reputable sites, I feel that most of what's on the net is fairly questionable. I pride myself on keeping pretty current and knowing as much as I can about the games industry. I have been noticing that there has been something different in gaming journalism for the past few years and I have now just recently been able to figure out what it is. It's an almost fundamental lack of fun. I read reviews of games that are almost always completely negative for one reason or another. Sometimes it's rough controls, sometimes it's bugs and glitches, other times it's a bad camera. Sometimes I think that these people spend so much time playing games for a living that they forget to have fun with them. A pretty recent example of this would be "Enter the Matrix." A friend of mine purchased the game when it came out and I had a damn good time playing through it. I admit that it had a few little rough spots, but if I had read all the negative reviews on it, I would have believed it to be almost unplayable, and would not have enjoyed what is, in my eyes, a pretty good game. Sometimes I feel bad for the writers of these other magazines that have basically devoted their lives to something that they do not get much enjoyment out of; those poor suckers. Your magazine comes as a breath of fresh air, because you provide all the fun stuff that is severely lacking in other magazines. Now this isn't to say that I'm going to stop reading --- or anything, but it is now pretty much just a source of hard facts. When it comes down to buying a new game, I look to your more opinionated reviews to find out if it is something that I can have fun with, and for that I thank you.

Sincerely, A. Brown

I just purchased a copy of **play** magazine and I have to tell you how refreshing it is to finally discover mature coverage of the medium. I'm in my mid-30s and I've been playing video games since the Atari and Intellivision ruled the family rooms of America. I've also worked on a few titles for a local developer, both as a freelance writer and producer. While I accept that video games are associated with adolescence—or a way of keeping in touch with same—I've never understood why the majority of writers feel compelled to act as if their own development has been permanently arrested somewhere between puberty and their first handjob. Your review of Primal in the May issue is easily one of the sharpest critiques of a game that I've ever read. And I haven't even finished it yet.

You and your staff also deserve credit for avoiding the typical "exploded view" layout schemes adopted by most gaming magazines. Keep up the excellent work.

Sincerely, David N.

We get a lot of these letters, most recently about Enter the Matrix and Tomb Raider AoD, two games that seem to have been hammered out of either jealousy (so much squabbling over exclusives leaves bad blood, and Infogrames was ruthless) or just to get in their jab; another body for the pile (funny, seeing as how they all jumped on covers). Granted, if you're not a hyper-skilled gamer, Tomb Raider is not for you, but that's no reason to deem it "unplayable;" simply state it's too hard for you and move on. Don't jam Lara into corners looking for bugs and lead people astray. The game has slowdown and a couple of rough spots, otherwise, it's great stuff. I've beaten it twice, so I know. As for the Matrix, as movie games go, and that's what it is, the game excelled given the parameters it was made under. It's sold over 2 million copies and everyone who writes in says the same thing as you. So who exactly are these reviewers representing? The trick is not to internalize, and to always review games based on their target demographic. I'd never buy Power Puff Girls, but it's a good, solid game that hits home for the kids that will, so, that's how I approach it... just like I'm not going to review Blinx as anything but a platform gamer's wet dream. Poor Ohshima; he's probably completely bewildered. The masters keep improving on the formula and the U.S. press keeps beating them down (ruining it for the rest of us) either because it's a cool critter, it's timed (again, these are made for good gamers), or because you can't run over prostitutes or play online. It's a Japanese platformer for God's sake, review it as such. In the end, the companies keep sending off their games to the slaughter, so it's really their fault. The game industry, for all of its grandeur, is internally confused, now more then ever. It's an industry afraid of its own shadow, ruled predominantly by all the wrong people. We're trying really hard to get it back, but the boardrooms of America are scary places. If people only knew the real behind the scenes from the developer's point of view...oh man. It's a story I'd love to tell...someday.

Drunk but not disorderly (purposely unedited)

Hello. and thank u my friend. **play** is what a Gamer is. I import P.N. 03 and 1 week later I see her on the cover of my beloved **play**. i come home from the bar tonight and I see Castlevania on the cover, w/ 20 pages of glory. i beleave we were seperated at birth. I work at (he works at a game store) so in a way im my own revewer. I am intrusted to opinion. i try to keep them away from the s--t and keep um true to the c--t. ok sorry im a little drunk and watchin Lupin the 3rd on Cartoon network. so im having a good night and had to write this. but anyway, I just wanted to say hi and all of that stuff. Nothing makes me more happy then knowing that there are others that share my own feelings toward games. Keep up the great work. ive been there sence Gamefan and ya (just to be the big shot) i have that #1 issue of Gamego. oh and i also sell out your mag at work every month, we only get like 5 so it sucks but before i even tell them about my stupid (unnamed) mag witch is as sad as a l-----n with an a----c g----r, I tell them that witch is play =) . (sorry about the spelling. i really suck and im really drunk) so what im saying is YOU ROCK. thank u and ill email u again when im not as drunk or im not playing EQ. damn that game it steals your soul =P
... (name withheld for obvious reasons)

Dude, that's gonna be some hangover, and we had nothing to do with Gamego. We love ya though! Don't get in your car.

P.N.03
PRODUCT NUMBER

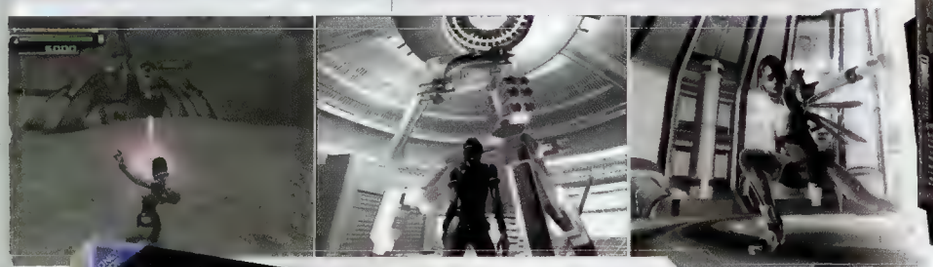
P.N.03

DANGER AROUND EVERY CURVE.

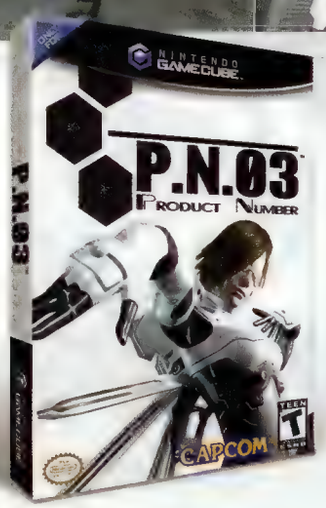
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Skratching their way back...

NEC is up to its old ways—hatching first-party brands with lasting power

NEC's first game back, Tube Slider, may have hit with a whimper rather than a scream, but only for lack of retail distribution and marketing; it's a great game. Following Culdcept, the card game that swept Japan and is now headed to a console near you, their 800 lb. gorilla beckons, and you're seeing it here for the very first time; say hello to Skratch, NEC's all- new action star. He's got Bonk's big shoes to fill but this is a game rich in play mechanics and story that should once again, do the name proud. Skratch's world is one of magical creatures of all shapes and sizes, of fantastic locations spanning the far reaches of the history of the world and beyond. The adventures of a wizard and his familiar; this is a world that will grab you and never let go. One of the unique gameplay hooks in Skratch is his prehensile tail that works in tandem with the right analog. Using the left analog for direction the right analog is essentially a virtual extension of Skratch's tail which can reach out to grab enemies or depending on the magic earned, do away with them using an array of elements such as fire and ice. Skratch can be running along, dodging foes and obstacles, and without breaking stride grab onto a necessary object and drag it along behind him. Skratch's tail will also work as the ultimate platforming play mechanic, for swinging, spinning, and whatever the environment might throw his way. One example is scaring humans. Skratch, being a familiar, exists only in the spirit world. As a result, items picked up by Skratch look to be floating independently as if manipulated by a ghostly hand. The fear generated by humans can be harvested to benefit Skratch when he casts magic.

Aside from being a high-concept platformer, Skratch is also rich in characters and storyline, and will feature vivid real-time story telling. Developed by Pirate games here in the States, Skratch is NEC's first joint US/Japan venture, and hopefully the precursor to Bonk 3D and a host of both familiar and new NEC brands.



"Aside from being a high-concept platformer, Skratch is also rich in characters and storyline."



Skratch is impish, clever and quick witted... His master Rathe, although a powerful wizard, is not





It's already apparent that Skratch is going to be an intriguing character. We've yet to learn how he works in tandem with Rathe but, a similar formula certainly worked wonders in Sony's The Mark of Kri

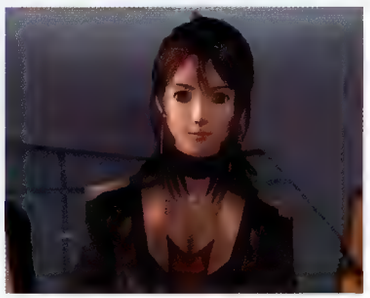
A whole new Saga?

Namco goes back to the drawing board

Namco and Monolith Software have begun revealing information on the second installment of their epic sci-fi RPG series, Xenosaga. The details are still relatively scarce on this PS2 title, but the big shock is that the game, officially titled Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Bose, has done through some significant visual redesign. Characters now have a more mature look: Shion has lost her glasses, KOS-MOS appears without her headdress, and one of the guys (we can't even tell if it's Allen or Ziggy!) has had a total makeover. As promised in the first game, Shion's brother, Jin Uzuki, will be playing a major role, and the deep combat system and giant mechs will still be a big part of the saga. No release date was yet given for the game. Additionally, a remix of the first Xenosaga, titled Xenosaga Episode I: Reloaded, will be coming out in Japan on PS2 this November, which will include a preview of Episode II. The companies also announced a new RPG for the GameCube titled Baten Kaitos.







From the looks of it things certainly seem to be going in the right direction

PSP File: The latest intel

The anticipation mounts for Sony's grounbreaking handheld

Sony's highly anticipated PSP won't be released for more than another year, but new information on the portable system that's been dubbed "the Walkman for the 21st century" has come out of Japan to tantalize on-the-go gamers. Although burning questions about pricing, software and a more precise release date have yet to be answered, Sony has confirmed that the PSP may be a conduit to movies, music and more, and also revealed many new technical details about the system:

PSP CPU Core: MIPS 32-bit core (similar to PS1), with a128-bit bus and 8 MB of memory; vector-unit based like PlayStation 2
PSP Graphics: Capable of rendering 3D curved surfaces and 3D polygons, with 24-bit full color (RGBA); 33M polygons/sec
I/O: USB 2.0, Memory Stick, extension port, stereo headphone output
Communications: Wireless LAN (802.11), IrDA
Controls: Will be similar to a PlayStation controller with a digital pad, L1, R1, start, select and one analog joystick
Media: Optical mini-disc with storage capacity triple that of CDs. Discs will offer parental controls, region coding, and copy protection
Battery: Lithium-ion (rechargeable)

Additionally, Sony explained that programming for the PSP will be very similar to that of the PS1, and that software libraries and middleware will become available toward the end of 2003 and into 2004 to help promote development. More details are scheduled to be announced at the Tokyo Game Show.

Masamune Shirow's Appleseed...

Coming to a theatre near you

Since being released in 1996, Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* has gone on to top the Billboard video charts and sell over 1 million copies in the US—the first Japanese film (animated or live action) to ever do so. Riding on that success, next year will see the theatrical follow up entitled *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, along with a feature-film version of *Appleseed*, his favorite work, which he conceived after *Ghost*. Director Shinji Arakami (*Bubblegum Crisis*) and his team are creating the film, billed as the world's first 3DCG animation, in the spirit of the original comic in such a way that he hopes will attract both fans and mainstream movie goers alike. 3D characters will be given the 2D cell animation treatment through the use of a "toon shader," which takes state-of-the-art motion capture and paints it like an animation cell. The story takes place in 2131 A.D. and follows the exploits of a female soldier, Deunan Knute, who is taken to an experimental utopia called Olympus, following a devastating war that pushes Earth to the brink of destruction. There she is reunited with her former lover whose body has been transformed into a cyborg and pulled into a struggle between processed human hybrids called Bioroids, and the humans who want them stamped out forever. Some Utopia, eh?

Just add DOA...

And then set the phone on vibrate



If you have a poor memory and can't maintain the lusty images of DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball ladies prancing in your head, just download them onto your AT&T cell phone for viewing at your leisure. A part of the Tecmo Wireless network launched in July, which will be featuring Might Bomb Jack, Solomon's Key and Tecmo Bowl in the coming months, the screensavers will offer a total of eight models, with two already available for a buck each. Some of the girls will have several images to choose from and may be limited in their release, depending on the popularity.

Say it ain't so!

Capcom legend Shinji Mikami calls it quits



Resident Evil creator Shinji Mikami has reportedly called it quits at Capcom, standing at the epicenter of an internal earthquake that has been shaking the Japanese offices for the past several months. Where he goes next is anyone's guess, but rumors are that Sony is a possible new home. With sales of Mikami's P.N.03 reaching paltry numbers in Japan, talk is that tensions between Mikami and Capcom were just that much higher before his exit.

More celebs jump on the pile

XIII nabs the X-Files champ and the original bat

We've been covering Ubi Soft's cel-shaded, comic-influenced FPS XIII quite extensively the past few months, excited for its groundbreaking take on the genre. Building the game's appeal even more is the recent announcement that former X-Files star David Duchovny will be providing the voice for amnesia-infected agent XIII. "XIII isn't like any video game I have ever seen—it plays like a suspenseful movie with a conspiracy-ridden storyline filled with enough twists and turns to keep everyone guessing," said Duchovny. "Players are in for a lot of surprises with this game—things are never what they seem, making for good drama and a great game." For a few of the other notable roles, Ubi Soft has also landed actress/musician Eve, starring as Major Jones, and Adam West as General Carrington.



Adam looking debonair sans vinyl underpants. Below: Duchovny after being asked to star in Evolution 2



Solid Snake

Plissken gets a game; let's hope it's not fubar



Looks like there's another Snake in town. Namco just grabbed the rights to develop a series of games based off the action flicks Escape From New York and Escape From LA, which starred Kurt Russell as Snake Plissken. Cult-favorite director John Carpenter commented, "Working with both the original team from Escape and the developers at Namco allows Kurt, Debra and me to reach a whole new generation of Snake fans and still be true to the original movie." Kurt Russell will provide the voice for Snake, who battles the evil lurking in a post-apocalyptic world with weapons, hand-to-hand combat and a little brainpower for those invariable puzzles. "Bringing Snake into the video game world should be a blast," said actor Kurt Russell. Look for the first game to hit around Christmas 2005.

Lara Croft bids Core farewell

...and Crystal Dynamics inherits a legend

Never mind that *Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* joins the rest of the summer crap pile, demonstrating even less memorable pop than the first movie. Paramount still can't quite come to grips with why the sequel's grossed an abysmal half of the first's successful $131 million, blaming the lackluster sales on the falling popularity of the video game. Perhaps making a great movie that doesn't reek of problems even in the trailers would be a good start. Seems everything's run amok in the land of Lara. While most everyone on the game side is remaining publicly diplomatic, internally the shakeup has been pretty severe, with Core president Jeremy Smith calling it quits and members of the team left scratching their heads. It's obviously time for some change, and get this: Crystal Dynamics now has the Tomb Raider developer's cap. The extent of the restructuring really won't be felt until the new TR goes into development, but this is certainly a sign of new life for the aging series. Does this mean the Kain team is a frontrunner for revitalization? Now that would be interesting.



Conspiracy...

Feels so empty without me



Santa Monica-based publisher Conspiracy Entertainment has a little bone to pick with caustic rapper Eminem—to the price of $5 million. Apparently, both parties had officially agreed to create a game with Eminem featuring his music videos, but the suit claims fraud and breach of contract, going after Eminem's management company, Cousins Entertainment, Inc. and Eminem's licensing agent, Bravado International Group, Inc. Word is that Eminem, through his agents, Cousins and Bravado, pulled out to align with another publisher; Rockstar was one of the names dropped. According to Chief Financial Officer Keith Tanaka, "We were not aware of any problems until we started getting some press on our new product. Then we started hearing rumors about Eminem negotiating a better deal with Rockstar Games or some other big video game publisher. Apparently, our deal must have been in the way because there was no other reason for Bravado and Cousins to stop us from introducing a video game that was approved before the contract ever got signed."

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"...strategy fans should be tenting their fingers in anticipation..."
-- GMR



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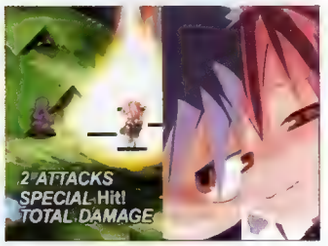
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--Electronic Gaming Monthly



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New Formation Attack System allows up to 4 of your characters to do quadruple the damage on one enemy!



Never before seen gameplay elements add a new dimension of strategy!



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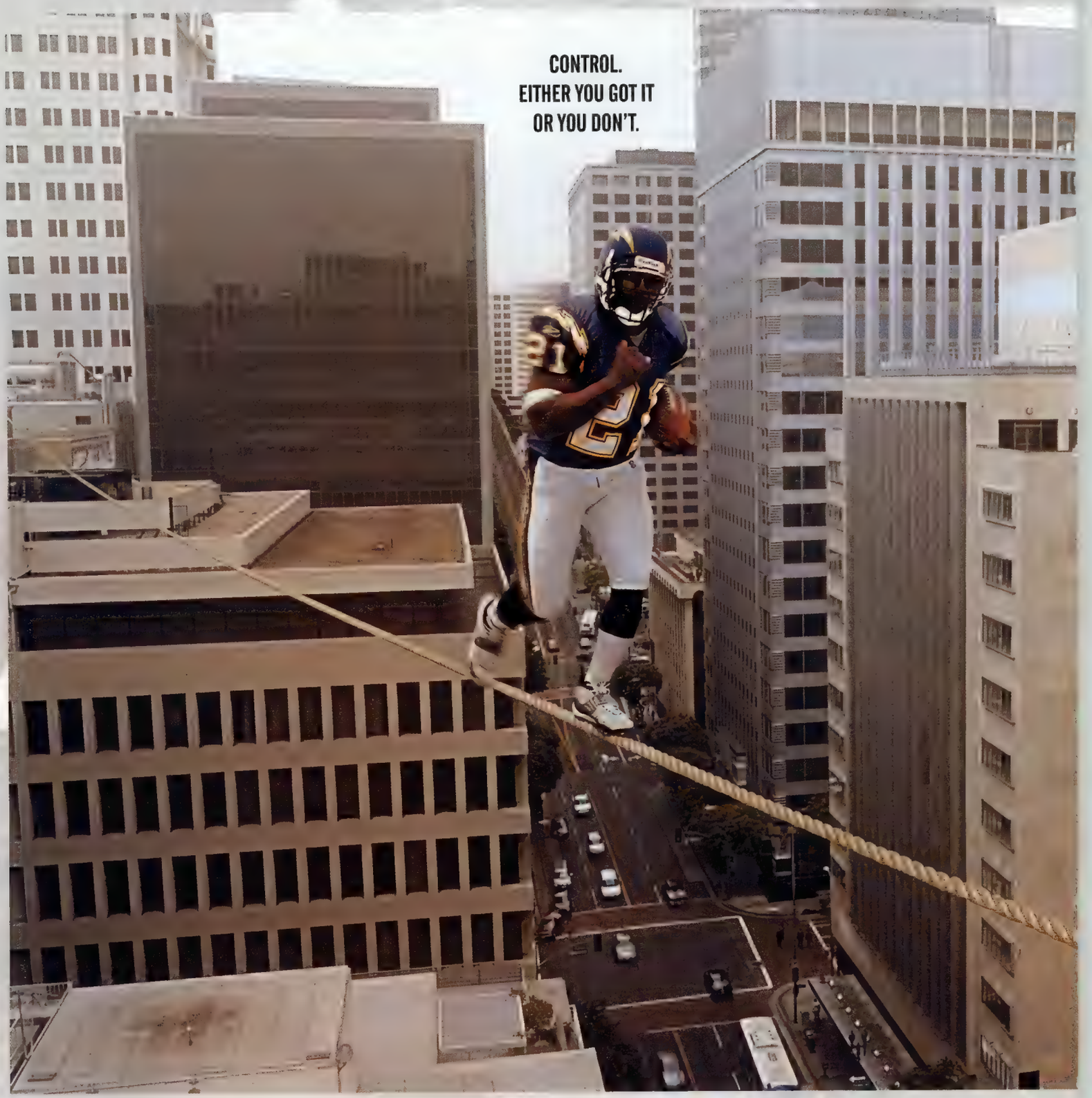
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PlayStation.2

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play games

Art: Atlus' Disgaea

Baldur's Gate

Dark Alliance II

Black Isle set out on their own to build a better Dark Alliance

words dave halverson



system: ps2, xbox, gc
developer: black isle
publisher: vu games
available: september



One of the most endearing and fundamentally sound genres spanning from 8 to 128-bit has been the dungeon crawl. From the labyrinths of Taito's Dungeon Magic on NES, to NEC's Dungeon Explorer and Arcus Odyssey on Genesis, moving through the keeps and corridors of 16, 32, and 64-bit, there's always been something compelling about pushing back demon hordes whilst keeping a close eye on your character's life-force, especially when it's set to music that stirs the soul. To this day I can conjure the BGM from all of the above and countless others; I can't remember my cell phone number, but that music is always there when I need it. People often ask me why I write in silence, to which I answer, "I don't—I just change the soundtrack in my head."

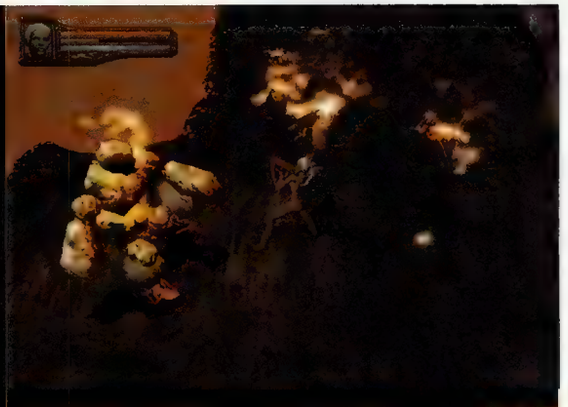
Baldur's Gate got its start on PC back in 1998 as a game I'd never play. I knew people that positively couldn't put it down, but one look at those circles under the players and a screen framed in a myriad of icons, and I ran for my console. Since I'm a huge proponent of Japanese character design, Baldur's dusty old Dungeons & Dragons namesake didn't help either—conjuring visions of balding geeks hovering around comic-book bins at dusty little conventions. Given my allergic reaction to its tomes of rules and weights and measures, it was a place far removed from my train of thought until the day I happened upon Dark Alliance. Here was a game I could relate to. With fair (very fair) maidens, straight-forward action and adventure, orchestral bliss and previously unseen detail, this was top-down gaming better than I had come to know and love it. The game was short and could have done with a bit more story, but it brought me back to a genre I'd nearly forgotten after being swept away by the allure of 3D.

Black Isle's follow-up is everything I'd hoped for and then some. The reigning kings of the trade have incorporated more (and branching) storylines, a new item-creation system that allows you to forge weapons (very useful), and a deeper worm hole altogether while managing to keep things very un-PC like in terms of flow and item management. You get the same zoom-down character interaction found in Dark Alliance's Elfsong Tavern (and who can ever forget Lady Alyth Elendara?), only more of it within a larger-scale Baldur's Gate, as

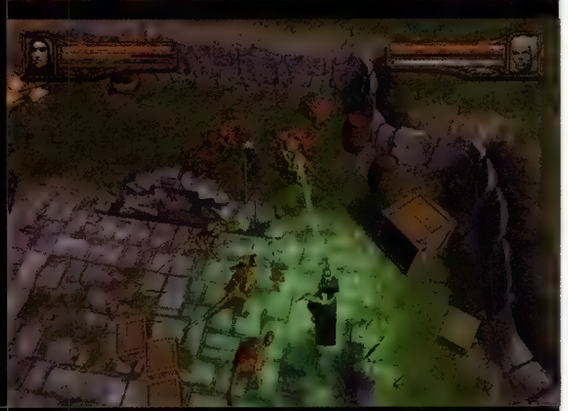
well as the same naughty equip screen and the ability to evolve strength, dexterity, intelligence, constitution, wisdom and charisma as you see fit. Basically, this is a bigger, better, deeper version of Dark Alliance with more of everything you loved as well as some welcome improvements. Front and center on the list is the new "Shift System," which provides four new slots in which to assign abilities, depicted in familiar directional-pad form accessible by pressing the L trigger and simply pushing the right analog in the appropriate direction. Once assigned, pressing L triggers the desired action. Combined with the traditional D-pad system, you now have five abilities at your fingertips at any given time, allowing you to toggle between magic, one-handed, two- handed and ranged armaments on the fly.

The campaign, again unfurling in the Forgotten Realms setting, traverses both familiar and new settlements across the Western Heartlands and the Northern Sword Coast in Fearûn. Since the cities' heroes vanished with The Onyx Tower after Dark Alliance, five new travelers must arise to face the insidious evil haunting the citizens of Baldur's Gate: barbarian Dorn Redbear, dark elf monk Vhaidra, moon elf Ysuran Auondril, warrior priestess Allessia Faithhammer, and treasure hunter Borador "Goldhand." As expected, the strengths, weaknesses and ensuing gameplay associated with each changes the action dramatically. Vhaidra, for instance, cannot wear medium or heavy armor without training and cannot use great weapons. Her best assets are her long legs (a swift kick to the wedding tackle to be exact) and she's also quite adept with magic. Dorn, on the other hand, is exceptional at melee combat, but is limited in terms of armor. Allessia can wear any armor, is built like the wrestler Joanie "Chyna" Lauer and is formidable in both spell casting and melee combat. Borador's strength is the crossbow—an excellent choice if you prefer ranged combat. And the haunting necromancer, Ysuran, travels with tome in hand, a wicked spell caster with rapid rejuvenation skills. Most importantly, and key to the series' success, each of them is animated to top-down perfection. While one of the biggest Achilles' heels of the genre is in-game art and animation (second to repetition), Dark Alliance pretty much set the standard for quality, and the sequel follows suit. Atari's upcoming Dungeons and Dragons pales in comparison; in fact, no game boasts Baldur's level of detail, and Black Isle take their evil just as seriously as their heroes. The wickedness this time around runs deep, traversing a ruined city beneath the earth, the abomination-filled Bloodmire Manor, the shadowy, unholy keep of a vampire lord, and bizarre realms beyond the planes of normal existence. Sea temples, Skull Gorge, Reaching Woods, Trollclaws...this is a universe steeped in wretchedness—places you wouldn't want to be without a controller in hand. For now, this franchise simply owns top-down dungeon atmosphere and graphics. If you thought Dark Alliance was beautiful, wait until you see what's on display here. The floor of the very first lair you enter is stunningly formed. Neither bump-mapped nor baked-in, the surface is molded as if centuries of crust settled on uneven stones. Every plane of the game is stunningly portrayed with tiny little trinkets and potion bottles meticulously displayed. Black Isle's graphics are right on par with Snowblind's (the developer behind Dark Alliance—Black Isle produced—who are currently working on Dark Alliance II's closest competitor, Champions of Norrath, set in the Everquest universe). Topping off the visual bliss, the lighting is exquisite, the textures ultra-rich, and not only is that spectacular Baldur's water back, but there's more of it along with a host of other environmental factors that equally beguile.

Come prepared, however: Dark Alliance 2 throws a lot your way in terms of enemy AI and attack patterns. Organized battalions ambush regularly, bosses spawn annoyances to hunt you down and new environmental dangers hinder your progress. The gameplay is the very picture of give and take, charge and withdraw. You won't be diving in hacking away at any point in this game. Regardless of your potion stash or status, you will die trying. And therein lies the promise of this franchise: lore and pretty graphics aside, it's all about gameplay in the end—even blocking and parrying has a skill to it, as does ranged combat and spell casting. This is still every bit the thinking man's action game; now there's just more of it to love. And finally, let's not



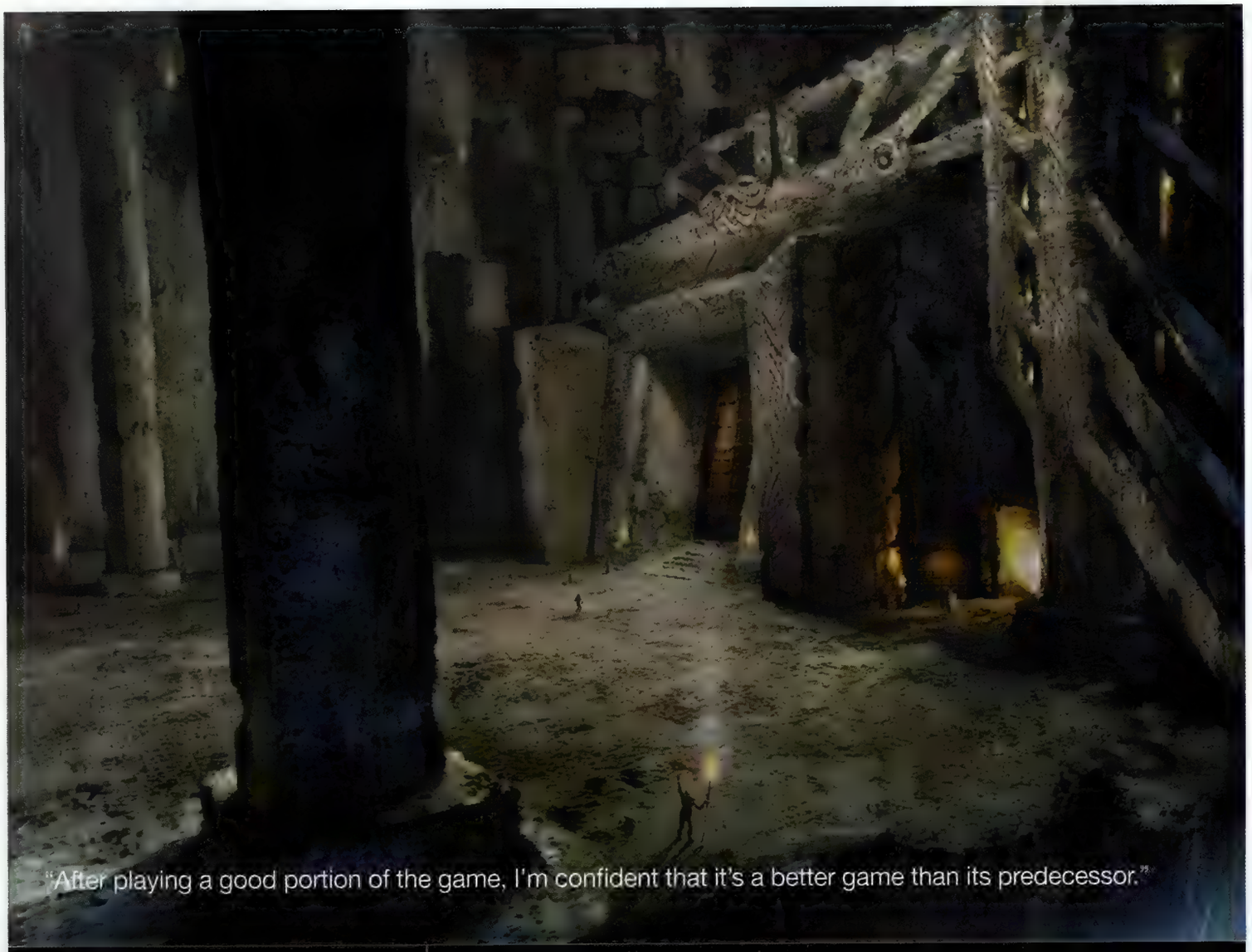






The detail that Baldur's Gate has become famous for (including that amazing water) is evident throughout the adventure, whether you're in light or high above the action

"Dark Alliance 2 throws a lot your way in terms of enemy AI and attack patterns."



"After playing a good portion of the game, I'm confident that it's a better game than its predecessor."

forget that element of Dark Alliance that helped burn it into our brains forever—an orchestral soundtrack that set the mood on dramatic. It too has returned, fading in and out to heighten the experience, along with new event-driven arrangements to further plunge you into these Forgotten Realms. I'd love to score Dark Alliance II (the exclusive first review was the basis for this cover story), but in its unpolished and segmented state it wouldn't be fair. After playing a good portion of the game, I'm confident that it's a better game than its predecessor, although, in the time that has passed since Dark Alliance, games have evolved a good measure. If these types of games are your cup of tea, it goes without saying that Dark Alliance II will be a must-own game. Whether or not it has the power to draw a larger crowd, however, rests in the able hands of Black Isle as they apply the all-important polish, balancing out the difficulty, linking events and working on the performances.

As a final thought, to dress the wound I opened by stating I wasn't a D&D fan, the Dungeons and Dragons brand may not be for everybody, but I believe great games transcend labels. If I didn't know any better, I'd be thrilled just to protect able-bodied women from minions of evil beasts and would-be pursuers. At the end of the day, and in this case well into the night, it's all in good day's hunt.





Other characters would do well to avoid such a massive horde, but Dorn the barbarian knows no fear



Q&A

The project leads at Back Isle speak out on their first solo effort on Baldur's Gate, and how they set out to improve on the original

Q: Dark Alliance was a huge success, both critically and at retail. What are you bringing to the table this time around to make Dark Alliance 2 even better?



Dave Maldonado Lead Designer

A: After a few design iterations, the team decided to go with a somewhat pragmatic approach on Dark Alliance II: evolution, not revolution, and so on. How could we make the best game possible with the time, personnel, and materials allotted?

We started by focusing on what things we felt we could do best...and then got to it with ferocious intensity. We wanted to take the existing experience—those core things that really *made* BGDA—and max them out: more levels, more characters, more monsters, more (and harder!) boss fights, more allies, more items, more spells & feats, more core quests, more optional side adventures...just...*more everything*.

And I've got to say, as we enter the project's final stretch, I'm amazed at the work that everyone has done on the title...both the folks that first kicked it off and those who came on to help from other projects in the last couple months (the cavalry arrived!). Programming, audio, artwork, design (yeah, even with me around to muck it up)—I think they've all done some great stuff in the past eight months. Now it's four or five weeks to get several playable characters entirely balanced across 90+ levels...g-g-gah! But the good folks in Quality Assurance seem pretty enthusiastic about the title, and with their help I think we'll pull it off nicely.

The character designs were a blast to come up with and we're all hoping they'll be a blast to play. Many of the new spells and feats are immensely fun to use, like *ransacking* with Borador: basically, you give an enemy a taste of boot leather instead of striking it with your weapon for a chance at an extra treasure drop...sort of an exceedingly violent variation on picking pockets, heh. Why is running around kicking monsters in the pants for extra gold such a hoot? It's hard to nail down the real *why* of it, but it is...almost as much as *shield-bashing* monsters into a chasm, sending them careening to their terrible deaths. Hee-hee! The game's full of wacky stuff like that, and it gets even better when two people are playing together.

The monsters are pretty crazy now too, especially the bosses. We wanted to keep players on their toes, try to surprise and delight with every new enemy, from their abilities and behavior to their appearance and animations. You'll see enemies taunt (some of the rare taunts are priceless), block attacks (sometimes too often—we're working on that, heh), run away when outclassed, cast spells to help their friends (those Zhentarim clerics of Bane can be a real hassle) and so on. The new creatures look fantastic, and there's some funky stuff in there like ropers (monsters that are basically immobile, but shoot out sticky strands to pull you close so they can bite your face off). And the bosses are *mean*, even the "lesser" ones like the basilisk: turn around or hide your eyes behind your shield by blocking when its eyes start glowing to avoid being turned to stone. And the greater ones, like the huge green dragon Baragoth...man, that guy's always in a crappy mood. Illudra the Sea-Witch, too...I mean, who brings a whole *kraken* to a fight? That's just not fair! All in all, the new bestiary should impress. A million thanks to art and programming for bringing so many of the design team's insane suggestions to life!

There are a lot of sweet levels to run around in, too. Sure, we had to drop the descent into the volcano with the salamanders...and the jungle island full of dinosaur-riding lizardmen (the boss was this really huge dinosaur with a lizardman-filled howdah on its back; it *rocked all*, boo-hoo!) and the pyramid interior complete with Curse o' the Mummy Madness...but the sheer amount of nifty new places to explore is still almost staggering. Many areas, aside from just looking cool, have multiple elevation levels, traps of all sorts (spikes that shoot from the floor, bladed pendulums, whirling circular blades, goblin-grown mushrooms that give off toxic spores when disturbed, etc.), environmental hazards (earthquakes, burning buildings, magma, etc.),...again, a million thanks to the A&P crews for belting this amazing stuff out in so little time.

Well, I could go on for pages but I've got to get back to work...it's, what, about a month until we submit? It's been tough, with lots of long hours, hard decisions, and gut-wrenching compromises, but it's been fun and we think the end results will be well worth it all. I hope everyone loves the game.



Scott Lane Executive Producer

A: When making a sequel to a successful game, the biggest challenge is to make sure it lives up to the first game and more. One pitfall we wanted to avoid was changing too much. Collectively, we took a hard look at what the fans of the first game liked and where they would have liked to see more. We decided the main areas that needed improvement were length of game, depth, combat and variation. BGDA was an awesome game and we knew we had our hands full but once we nailed down exactly where to improve and what to leave the same, it was relatively straightforward.

BGDA2 is two-three times bigger than the original. We have so many new unique areas that we are confident the gamers will feel like they are regularly visiting new locations with a distinctly different look and feel. It is difficult to put into words how cool some of the new levels look. This many levels really allowed our artists to show their creative side and have a lot of fun creating crazy environments.

One of the ways we approached adding more depth was with what I think is the biggest new feature, "item creation." This is especially cool because not only can you find gems throughout the game and put them together with items to create powerful weapons, armor, rings and amulets, you can also find existing magic items and break them down, using the broken-down items in conjunction with other magical items to make some pretty powerful things. This should add a lot of depth and give the gamer more control during their experience. Also, it gives you a reason and reward for checking every corner and hidden area in the levels.

The entire combat system has been enhanced. BGDA2 allows you to place development points (points you gain when your character passes a level, used to buy new abilities) in combat-oriented feats which will allow you to do several things that you couldn't in the original. Characters can perform increasingly effective (as opposed to merely cosmetic) combinations where the second and third hits do more damage and have distinctly different animations and special effects. Players can also place development points that allow to dual-wield weapons without any penalties. This in conjunction with the combo attacks give you some pretty cool visual attacks as well as allows you to mow down monsters at a faster rate. Also, monsters can block so you'll have to work on your timing.

To improve variation, we've created five brand new playable characters to the first game's three. This allowed us to explore some of the classes and abilities you don't often see in action-RPG games. Vhaidra, the female monk, is devastating in unarmed combat. However, she can also earn the opportunity to pick up skills as an assassin, such as the ability to use stealth and be almost invisible (Borador, the rogue, can do this from the start). Imagine sneaking up on a big boss and using arterial strike, inflicting quadruple damage and leaving it with a bleeding wound that slowly drains its hit points! Again, this gives gamers the option to play the game several different ways depending on their preferred style while still allowing them to play the same way they played in the first game.

We've also created twice as many monster types for BGDA2. The Forgotten Realms has so many totally cool monsters and we were thrilled to dig in and put our spin on some of our favorites. The monsters are also more intelligent, which makes things even more interesting. For some creatures, this may well be the first time that someone has taken advantage of technology to bring them to life in an action-RPG environment (metal-eating rust monsters, for example, or the frighteningly powerful nightwalkers). One creature that jumps out to me is the chimera, a three-headed beast that flies. Each head does a different attack and the way it flies and swoops down on you is absolutely amazing. We are confident that the fans of BGDA will respond well to BGDA2 and we have some awesome surprises waiting for them.

"Well, I could go on for pages but I've got to get back to work...it's, what, about a month until we submit?"



Kevin Osburn Producer

A: I was lucky enough to have worked on the first Dark Alliance, so I know all the ins and outs within in the game from a development aspect as well as the actual game itself. I am extremely close to the game, and I am amazed with what the team has been able during the development of BGDA2. I knew all the criticisms of the first game and I have made sure that we are addressing everything we can. For instance, I think one of the biggest complaints from the original BGDA was the amount of time it took to beat the game, which on average seemed to be 10-13 hours, which left a lot of people wanting more. I think right now we are looking at 20-25 hours of gameplay at a minimum because we discussed early on what our options were to ensure the game was longer than the original. We have added the obvious stuff, like twice as many levels and we are providing more interaction for the player within the levels by incorporating more interactive characters and a good variety of different puzzles (don't worry, no falling platforms like the ones from the first game). We have added more D&D creatures to fight, but you will also see some creatures you have never seen or heard about before because these mean and nasty creatures have been created by some of the folks here at Black Isle Studios. There's a more in-depth story for the player to discover, and more importantly, while playing the game you will find out what happened to the original three heroes and what happened after stepping out of the portal at the end of the first game. Who knows, the original three characters may just make an appearance or two in BGDA2. I think everyone is going to be really excited about our item creation system; it's definitely up on the list of the things everybody wanted in the original BGDA, right now we are working on balancing the system and the QA team testing BGDA2 is having a blast with it. Our lead designer really wanted to improve the ranged combat this time 'round, so he came up with a system that would allow the player to actually land their ranged attacks on the enemies more often, which we lovingly called the "fire control system." We have also added a bunch of other cool things that are more subtle. For instance, while in your inventory, you can actually rotate your character in the inventory screen so you can check out how much detail goes into the characters and their unique sets of armor! The inventory background image behind your character will change to depict the level you are in at that moment.

One last thing I have to say is I have never worked with a team that is so dedicated to their project. Once the game is finished, I think the fans out there will agree.



Jon Hales Lead Artist

A: It is quite a challenge to pick up the proverbial torch and answer to the critical artistic acclaims BGDA received, but the art staff here at Black Isle has some exceptional artists. I am terribly pleased to say, nonwithstanding their lead's direction, my art team stepped up to the plate and delivered some incredible stuff. Honestly, we have succeeded in making the game even more visually stunning than the first in many areas which will be readily apparent to the gamer.

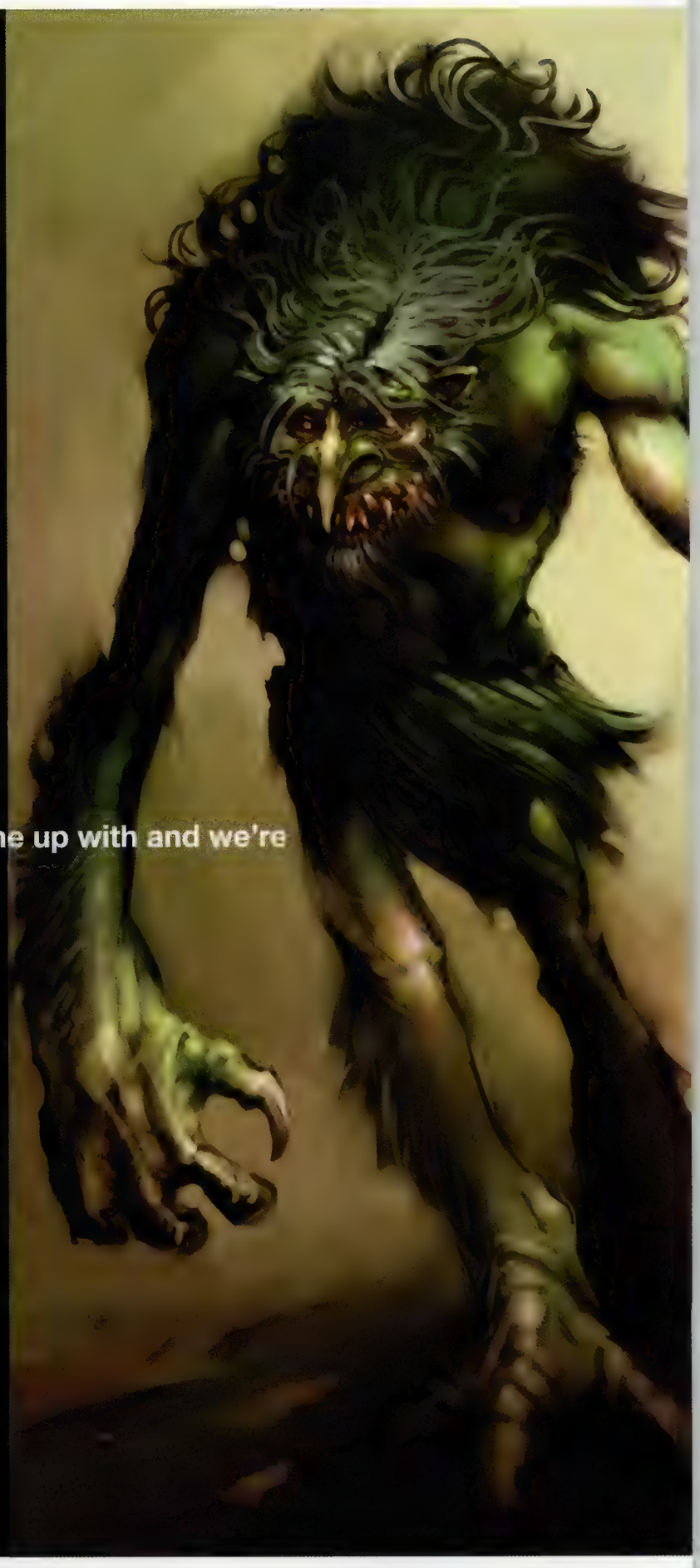
Our first focus was player characters. If we weren't going to go with the choose-your-own-adventurer/mix-and-match look, we decided our characters must be a personality. Each of our new five characters have a very distinct look, dress and style. Their individuality is showcased in animations, clothing, abilities and in the way they talk and interact with others. No longer will the male fighter and the disgruntled dwarf don the same leather-reinforced dress the sorceress wore. They have their own take on what is appropriate to wear into battle. It took quite a few more resources and time to make this happen, but the result is well worth it.

The second area we wanted to improve was NPC creatures and animations. We have added a host of new enemies to wield blade and intellect against, as well as a small army of allied, neutral and enemy non-player characters. Man was this a challenge, but rarely is anything easy worth it. We have more than doubled the size of the bestiary. Our animators have been working around the clock to breathe life into our new additions. The original creatures from BGDA may have been animated, but all of our new creations and additions have an actual soul. The animations, I believe, are much improved.

Lastly, in response to our vocal fan base, we've increased the overall size of the game substantially. Thanks to our brilliant lead designer, Dave, we have an incredible range of levels, from "classical" dungeons and enchanted forests to more bizarre locales like the Elemental Planes and a somewhat Lovecraftian kuo-toa temple to Blibdoolpoolp. This also was an immense challenge. I am actually quite surprised at the amount of material we were able to create in the time we had.

This game was probably the most challenging I have as yet worked on. But, when one is surrounded by incredible team members with great talent, excellent leads, and great producers, you can't help but create a great a game. I'm confident those who sit down to play BGDA2 will be hooked.

"The character designs were a blast to come up with and we're all hoping they'll be a blast to play."



Voodoo Vince

system: xbox
developer: beep industries
publisher: microsoft
available: september

One small step for voodoo dolls...one giant leap for Xbox platforming

words dave halverson

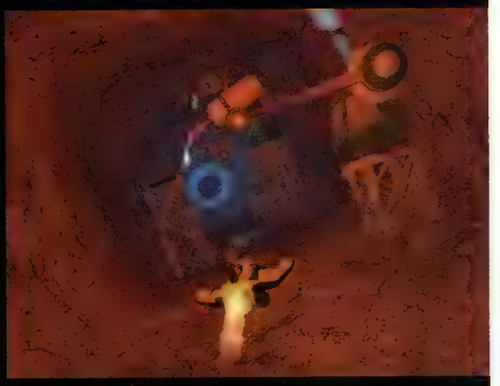


I'm not sure why the rest of the world plays video games, especially these days, but Voodoo Vince is the kind of game I dream about—and I'm not saying that because we broke the story. To be honest, the game is even better than I believed it to be back in March, when I presumed the gameplay would, for the most part, revolve around voodoo powers and the ensuing sight gags—before I tasted the fruit of a near-final game and fell in love with a f'd up doll in a way I never thought possible. I knew Voodoo Vince was going to be cool, but not this cool; at times it puts me in an absolute trance. This is more like a Miyamoto-inspired platformer (only with darker themes and dry wit) than it is a voodoo-action game. The voodoo powers—which, once acquired, appear in random order when Vince summons them—certainly spice things up, but at its core this is a complex, puzzle-laden platformer with a brilliant backbone that simply oozes style. You get an inkling of what's in store on "Main Street," but when you hit "The Square" it all begins to come into focus. The butterflies in your belly begin to churn as that wonderful feeling of discovery begins to wash over you. Truly great games have a way of lifting you up—it's why we seek them out—and Voodoo Vince is in that elite class. How strange that after paying a gazillion dollars for Rare, a little studio called Beep Industries turns out the system's Mario. If Microsoft doesn't take this little guy all the way, I may make a voodoo doll out of them. I'm sure that Rare will blow us away in the near future as well, but Beep is just a little guy.

Let's take The Square for example. The goal is to get into the museum, which is being guarded by a skeletal jazz bone-daddy who agrees to let you pass only if you'll jam with him. In and around the place you'll find a jazz club, a pawn shop with a horn in the window, a masquerade party, a large statue of a horse, and a clock tower. Ultimately you'll feed the horse to kick you up to the tower to change the time so you can take the mask you find and get into the party where you'll score some fake money to buy the horn that you'll learn how to play at the jazz club. Within that scenario lie many complexities, but that's the gist, not to mention that the level is teeming with monsters and collectibles that are worth tracking down, scattered throughout a network of nooks and crannies the likes that I've rarely seen. If you're a "get everything" type of player, this is your heroin. The deeper you go, the better the puzzles get, and they are almost always platform-based, making good use of Vince's perfectly tuned control: the tried-and-true double-jump-spin-and-hover is in full effect and the game is designed to reward those skilled in its pursuit. In between, Vince interacts with a twisted array of voodoo-inspired characters and manifestations, dealing







with each situation with the driest of wit. His voice takes some getting used to but, for the most part, he's among the coolest speaking characters you're likely to find in a modern platformer, mostly because he realizes he's in a game and isn't afraid to show it. He's especially vocal fighting bosses, which is understandable seeing as how most of them have nostrils bigger than his body.

Before I get out of here—this is a preview after all—I need to speak to the environments, and especially the music. The levels reek of the game's theme, all bathed in vivid yet twisted and antique architecture, textured to perfection, within immense, rich and exquisitely lit settings bursting with possibility. As for the music, I have one word: soundtrack. Imagine vintage New Orleans jazz pumped with pop and classical influences. No, don't—don't imagine anything. Experience it for yourself if you're into platformers. Vince's pain will be your gain soon enough; the game is but a month away.

"Truly great games have a way of lifting you up—it's why we seek them out—and Voodoo Vince is in that elite class."

Vince gets things swingin' in the bayou, gathering goodies for the ultimate Gumbo!







Jak II

Naughty Dog's innovation machine cranks into overdrive



words brady fiechter

Naughty Dog is a wickedly smart organization, leaving little to chance. They possess truly superior technology and treat it like the precious commodity it is. They read all of their press, listen to their fans, and likely have a wing by now for all of their focus testing. But is such scrutiny the seed of innovation or safety? Is it possible to over-think a given premise or video game?

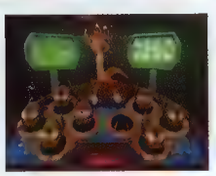
When Crash Bandicoot bounced into my life, it was (he was) mind-numbingly magnetic. Not only did the game smash anything the PlayStation had to offer at the time in terms of both visuals and control, it possessed a look and polish rarely, if ever, seen in a 3D action game. It also incorporated 2D and 3D, succeeding at both, and was littered with brilliantly executed platforming from beginning to end. Crash was their gem, goofy and aloof yet irresistibly cool and lovable. It was exactly what the game world needed...and then the masses came to town. Crash Bandicoot sold millions, took off in Japan (which is still unheard of for an American-bred game) and soon became privy to the spoils of super stardom, ushering in the imminent sequel, tuned for mainstream America to bask in the orange crush.

In my opinion, Crash never exceeded his glorious debut. The sequels, while extremely successful, never improved on the original; rather, they just mucked up the works trying to find the world's G-spot. In the end, however, choosing the path of consumer enlightenment seemed to pay off. So am I wrong to wish they'd stuck to a more Mega Man-like credo, continually feeding the core audience by rarely straying from the formula? Probably.

Enter Jak and Daxter, my Y2K Game of the Year and **play**'s first cover. Jak and Daxter, like Crash, was a technological leap for the incumbent Sony platform. For the first time, an entire game was linked as one continuous scenario. It was masterful, littered with hardcore platforming and as deep as the ocean by action gaming standards...but that was the year IT came to town. The game every other magazine touted as revolutionary, that big technically challenged game of death, destruction and real-time go-anywhere criminal behavior—GTA 3. All of a sudden the world began to change, as publishers began to realize that the answer all along wasn't ground-breaking graphics or gameplay; it was violence, the very thing the industry feared most, that would ring up their sales, and so Jak and Daxter, while hugely successful, didn't have the impact that Crash did. Nor did Sly Cooper (although, wait until you see the sequel—my God), Drakan, and a host of other would-be big-deals. In fact, since GTA broke the mainstream barrier, the industry has yet to pull itself up back onto the barstool.

And so, finally, my point: what do you think a company as wise as Naughty Dog would do given these circumstances? Ratchet up the action in Jak and Daxter or...make it darker and plug the whole works





system: playstation 2
developer: naughty dog
publisher: sony
available: october

into the GTA blueprint? The latter, of course, and that's exactly what they've done, incorporating short mission-based gameplay into an integrated story that unfolds within a massive go-anywhere bustling metropolis, and when I say "bustling," it's an understatement. Just like GTA, you heist cars (although these hover), head for your main goal or sub quest, and partake in a massive underground conspiracy working for a vigilante faction "for the people," formed to unseat an evil ruler and uncover a government plot to control the masses. Jak's motivation comes in the form of revenge, after being imprisoned for two years and pumped full of so much Dark Eco he makes Jekyll and Hyde look like Will and Grace. After his escape—which is damn cool by the way—Jak becomes the universe's most wanted, so everywhere he goes, the police dog his every move—and herein lies one of my concerns playing the preview build.

Like the vehicles in GTA, the hover-craft in Jak II vary in size and physics, but instead of lanes, you must navigate in the vertical realm, either high or low. Traveling low, it's nearly impossible to move fast and not clip the cops who are densely littered throughout the city looking for you. There's a small map depicting their numbers, but keeping an eye on the map is difficult given the skill needed to fly clean. Flying high is equally challenging; traffic is slow and heavy, so speed is not an option, especially given ND's traditionally buoyant vehicles. The funny thing is that for all of the cops chasing and squabbling (they jabber into their radios non-stop), in the event you are captured (which is rare, as they are a cinch to outrun or run over), there's no penalty or escape snippet á la Herdy Gerdy or Wind Waker; you simply flash back to their resident signpost and set out again—leaving the only reason to carefully negotiate the airways to keep from the annoyance of them chasing you. Ultimately, your only path to impetus enlightenment is through splitting traffic vertically, which is cool (cops and all)...until you embark on a timed mission. I made the first three-minute challenge by two seconds after three tries, but it's pretty hard, which is fine; I'm just not sure whether or not I want to do this for an entire game I thought I'd be spending adventuring. Naughty Dog's trademark looping jungle-tech music doesn't help either. They need to branch out musically, and the sooner the better—this type of play needs radio stations or a variety of music to work. Anyway, you see where I'm going with city stuff. So far, it's just not for me.

The next quandary comes once you arrive at a given mission, since again, being much like Vice City, they're incredibly short. You get little snippets of brilliant ND gameplay and then it's off to sail around the city once more, heading to your next "event." Now, for all I know, the game could spin off in any number of directions from where I'm at, especially now that I've scored the hover board. I'm mere hours into what is likely a massive adventure, so the jury, though weary, is still out.

Now for the good stuff: first off, Jak II is illegally beautiful and polished in ways I never thought possible. The amount of pedestrians and police within the city is mind-boggling, but the fact that they act somewhat natural is astounding. The AI and detail at work here borders on super-human. The character design, too, is fantastic. The rebel forces are tattooed like human GP cars, and the main cast resembles a dark version of something Pixar or Disney might conjure up, making the real-time cinemas in the game simply wonderful to behold. This will be a game to be savored, laced with integrated story and a nearly immeasurable to-do factor. It's also exactly where I want the GTA model to go; I'd just like to see it tightened up a bit more. Give me a little more leeway in the city, more music (the music in the game really needs work) and a little more meat in the action, and I'll be card-carrying.

Until I've played through the entire game I won't be able to say whether or not I'm sorry that Naughty Dog has again chosen the path more traveled, rather than dishing out a bigger-badder-better version of a game I love to this day, but one thing is clear: this is a very special group of individuals who produce their own brand of magic for the explicit purpose of pleasing the most people





When it comes to character design, few if any U.S. companies do it better

One shell of a time

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

words dave halverson



When was the last time you played a really great arcade game? I've just been to GameWorks and besides Sega's Wild Riders—which Sega needs to port to console stat—I was bored to tears, although I must admit, the instant, and in the best cases constant, gratification that arcade games bring is sorely missed on console these days...until now at least. Konami's TMNT is put together with such savvy and wisdom of what makes the genre tick, it takes me back to the best of my truancy years, loitering at my local 7-11 playing Final Fight and Magician Lord until the money I sponged for lunch ran out.

Coming off like what the new Fox Block cartoon should look like, the game rides on scenes from actual episodes, but looks immeasurably better. Remember when animated cut scenes looked better then in-game graphics? Well, those days are gone. The cartoon sequences lower the standards here, due to the masterful animation, art, and lighting applied to this lovingly cel shaded and highly stylized game. In a perfect world the series would have been placed in the capable hands of Japanese animators, working with Eastman and Laird, but, well, it's not a perfect world, now is it?

Getting back to the game, all of the key ingredients needed to sculpt a legendary arcade game are in the mix. Beyond solid, great-looking models, fluid animation and physics that come right through the controller, the action has fighting-game precision (and collision) along with intuitive combos and air juggles, and multiple set camera angles that heighten both the action and the look of the game.

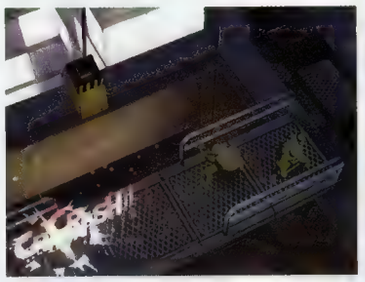
The other secrets reside in the underlying attention to detail, such as the ability to destroy elements like parked cars, Mousers and barrels, and use their explosions to your advantage. The tiered level design encourages jumping and dashing, power-up placement is masterfully laid, and you get a formidable and diverse array of enemies. Put to kind of arcade-style background music that the Japanese seem to have a monopoly on, TMNT is an adrenaline-charged, complete arcade package that perfectly represents four of the coolest characters to ever spring from the pages of a comic book.

"The Turtles basically never shut up—they're very vocal about how much they enjoy kicking ass."

system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: kce studios
publisher: konami
available: october

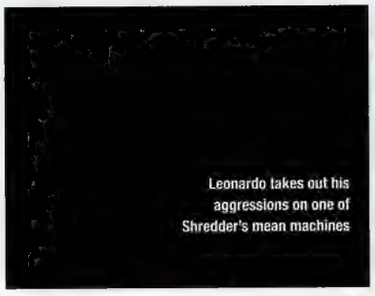
Having the series' actors perform the voices is a plus too, unless of course you have issues with words like nimrod, Mikeasaurus-rex, shellnado, and, yes, it rears its ugly head—cowabunga! The Turtles basically never shut up—they're very vocal about how much they enjoy kicking ass.

Most arcade games fall prey to repetition, but TMNT gets under your skin because it feels like a precision fighting game in an action shell which, in this day and age, is quite unique. Konami super-sized it, too, dividing the action into multiple stages of five acts a piece, all with different boss battles (and these are great boss battles) depending on your turtle of choice—the one thing this game isn't is arcade-short. There are even special dojo stages where Master Splinter helps you hone new abilities, so the action stays fresh the more you play. What more could a billion dollar (and climbing) franchise ask for? Hey, I know! A PG-13-rated CGI movie based on the original comic...now that would be cooler than shell.









Leonardo takes out his aggressions on one of Shredder's mean machines

system: xbox, pc
developer: planet moon
publisher: lucasarts
available: october



Armed and Dangerous

Tea-rific!

words dave halverson

If this game doesn't rock your world, then it's time to join the Celine Dion fan club and/or order up that frontal lobotomy (you'll need one to enjoy the other anyway) because, besides being a kick ass run 'n' gunner, Armed and Dangerous is damn funny. Those crazy Brits at Planet Moon have done it again, but this time inside half a decade, and on console, so whoopee!

In a pseudo-Brute Force team fashion, you (Roman looking like Strider in a parka) lead the Lionhearts—Jonesy, Q1-11 and Rexus (who seems to fancy spending time and chutes)—a band of Scottish Robin Hood wannabes who set out to pull off a major heist amidst a civil war and end up smack dab in the middle of a rebellion against a tyrannical king.







Trudging through over-the-top (upside down and sideways) missions littered with more explosions than a Jerry Bruckheimer cloning party, when you're not causing a major ruckus, you'll be defending fortresses, manning man-sized turrets and literally mowing down hundreds of charging, yelling and often-times intoxicated soldiers. If you were to play with the sound down, at least initially, A&D might actually appear to be a "normal" game...until Roman pounds a giant corkscrew into the ground and turns the world upside down, sending his would-be assassins to their squishy deaths. Otherwise, you know straight away that you're in la-la land, as soon as this lot begins squawking at each other like a zit-covered boy band fighting over the last tube of pimple cream.

Under the hood things are frighteningly high tech. The richness of the visuals, explosions, and models in the game are, for lack of a better term, top-notch, and the control (thankfully it's in third-person) are as manageable as any FPS set. A quick flick sends your squad off to sacrifice life and limb while you cycle through an array of scary guns to off the militia, swarming as only Planet Moon militia do, in that most precarious manner—half bent on killing you while seemingly wanting to die as spectacular a death as possible for God and country. All around you hear squabbling, soldiers going on about this or that, or even a friendly reminder from a squad member letting you know that either it's time for a spot of tea or that you've sent him to his death. Our demo ended after two short levels but it's easy to see that this is going to be one of this winter's very best Xbox exclusives, if not the sleeper hit of the year.

"...you'll be defending fortresses, manning man-sized turrets and literally mowing down hundreds of charging, yelling and often-times intoxicated soldiers"



Drake

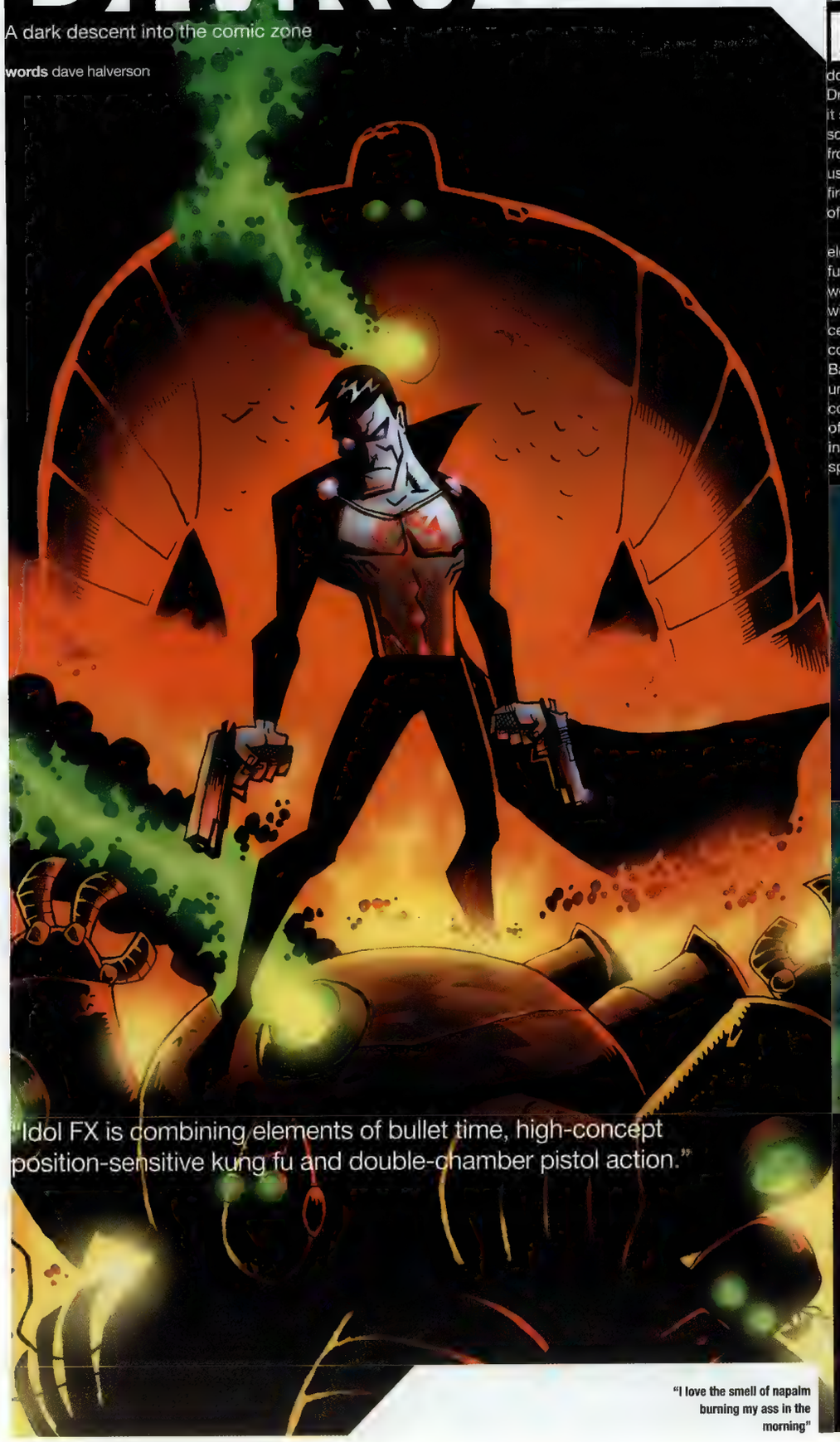
A dark descent into the comic zone

words dave halverson

system: playstation 2, xbox
developer: idol fx
publisher: majesco
available: november

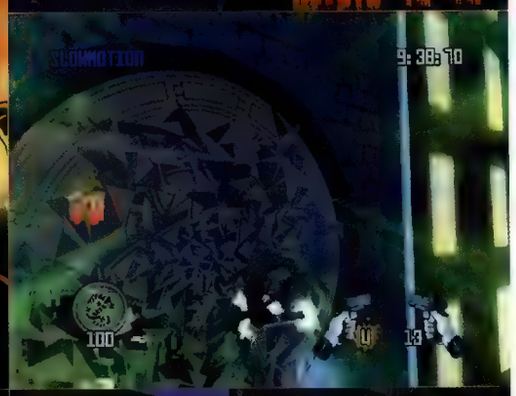
Looking like a cross between *Batman: The Animated Series, The Crow* and Gungrave, Drake is making his way to comics and console, pissed off and packin' double pistolas. His posse (well, before he died), The 99 Dragons, has been brutally murdered and the ancient artifact it swore to protect, stolen—along with the power to trap the souls of the living and use them to resurrect the dead. Back from the dead himself to kick some pilfering ass, Drake will use supernatural weapons, martial arts and a lethal quiver of firearms to keep the artifact from becoming the ultimate tool of evil.

Peeling Drake from comic to console, Idol FX is combining elements of bullet time, high-concept position-sensitive kung fu and double-chamber pistol action in a "neon-Gothic" (I wonder if they meant to say "neo-Gothic") setting, packed with mild platforming and manic action. The game, obviously cel-shaded, has a distinct comic-book look and feel, complete with "rata-tat-tat!" visual text cues much like those Batman battles of old when Adam West kicked ass in vinyl underpants and a leotard. It's also said to incorporate the coolest bullet time yet seen in a game, complete with a bevy of Matrix-style moves. That's quite a claim; we'll visit Drake in more vivid detail in the weeks ahead and bring you up to speed in the next issue.



"Idol FX is combining elements of bullet time, high-concept position-sensitive kung fu and double-chamber pistol action."







"I love the smell of napalm burning my ass in the morning"

Dungeons & Dragons Heroes

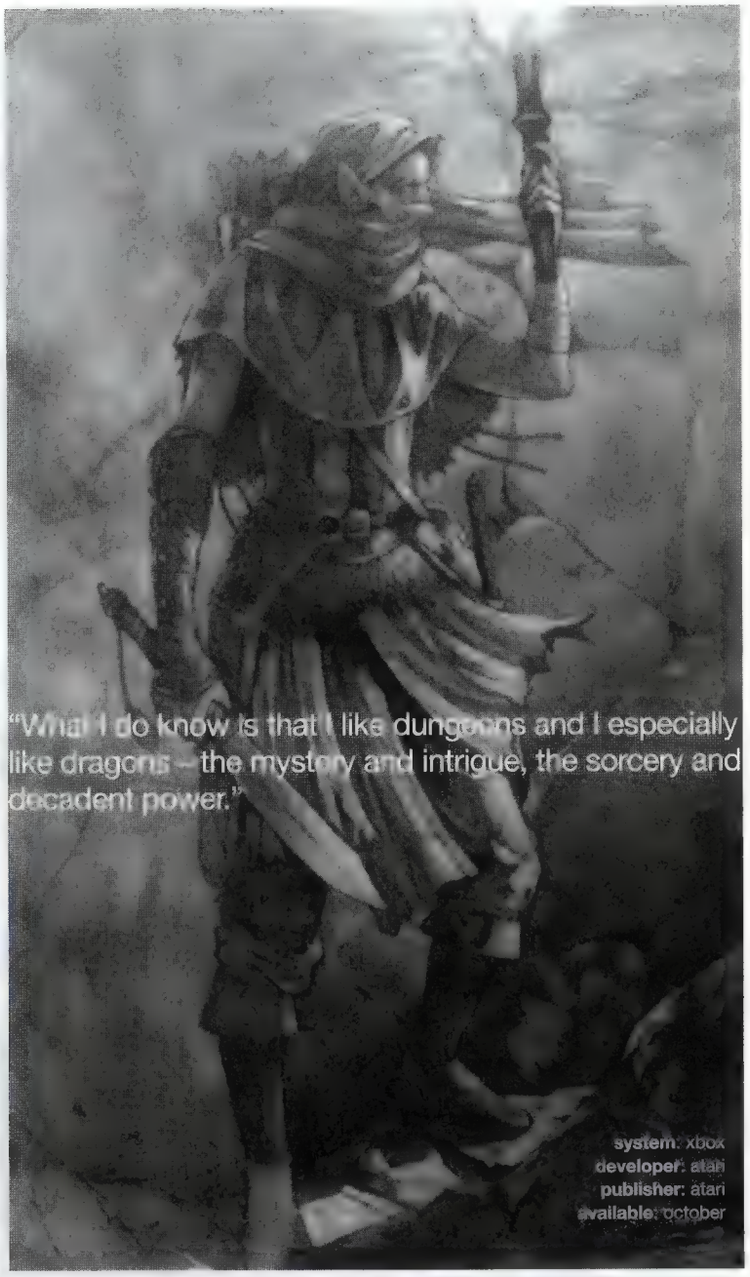
The top-down action-RPG fortunately continues to live

words brady fiechter

I know nothing about Dungeons and Dragons. What I do know is that I like dungeons and I especially like dragons—the mystery and intrigue, the sorcery and decadent power. In Dungeons & Dragons Heroes, the fantasy becomes top-down hack-and-slash reality across the ancient land of Baele. In those perilous times of magic and pestilence, there always seems to be some wicked tyrant looking to rule the world. Here we get to travel to an array of mystical settings to bring death to the nefarious wizard Kaedin, who has been raised from the dead by a band of idiotic clerics convinced they would be the puppetmaster to Kaedin's immense evil.

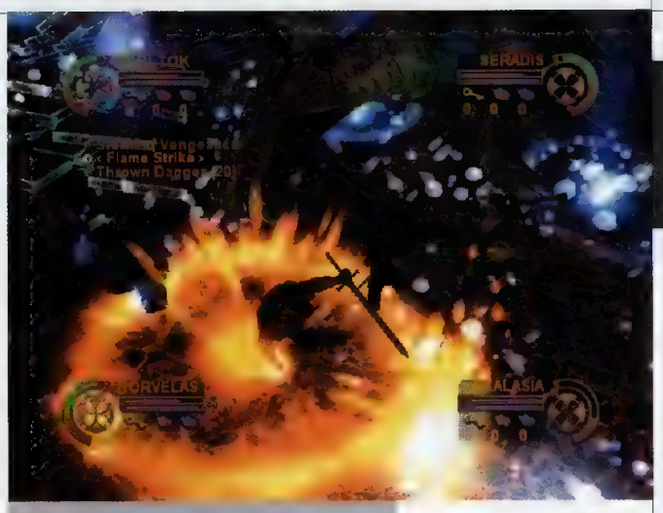
Bad move. Kaedin destroys his resurrectors and then continues his plot to decimate Baele. All this wickedness prompts another group of clerics to raise four warriors from the crypt of the four heroes. After all the resurrecting is over and you choose your favorite hero, it's off to battle all sorts of nasty creatures pulled from the Dungeons & Dragons universe. The final destination is the Castle Baele, but first things first.

While the basic gameplay component remains for each character—collect treasures, disarm traps, destroy countless foes of varying shapes and sizes, battle a nasty boss—your choice of hero does change the feel of the journey. If magic is your thing, Cyndryn the elf excels with her spiritual powers. For speed and agility, go for the rogue Akio, who can even pick locks, and if you like a well-rounded warrior, Aradin's your human. Or there's my personal favorite, the dwarf Barltok, who carries a mean hammer to pound the enemy into submission. Everyone starts out fairly limited in their range and technique. The depth of play comes from the leveling up, which draws from the experience you gain successfully gutting an area of its dense inhabitants. The game wisely sticks to basic areas of character growth, and you never have to wade through a mire of options and status screens. It's all kept simple and fun, very similar to Baldur's Gate, finding just enough depth to add to the adventure-RPG flavor. Mix in the four-player option and you've got a game of big replayability and classic appeal.

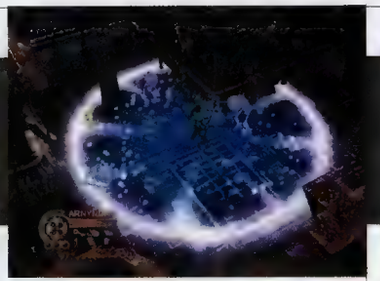


system: xbox
developer: atari
publisher: atari
available: october





With four warriors battling it out, the chaos runs high, lighting up the screen with magic effects







Beyond Good & Evil

Dateline's got nothing on Jade, Michel Ancel's first hero with legs

words dave halverson



BG&E

"It's apparent that Michel has dug deep to insure an experience that dwells in the mind as much as in the hand."

The vast, peaceful planet of Hyllis has fallen under siege by a relentless alien race. After a desperate struggle to defend her island, a Hyllian named Jade collapses in exhaustion—only to be tormented by disturbing visions. Despite public assurances that the planet has been secured, Jade begins to suspect that there's more to these invasions than the government has disclosed. When a rebel organization reinforces her doubts, Jade begins a harrowing journey to get to the core of the conspiracy. Armed with her camera, aikido staff, and resolute investigative skills, Jade sets out to expose the truth and to liberate the minds of her deceived people. Pushed to the very edge of her physical and spiritual will, she soon discovers that even these limits are not what they seem. Her quest for the truth knows no bounds.

What would you do if you learned that everything you knew was a lie, were hired to uncover a government conspiracy, and emerged as the last hope for saving humankind? Maybe a better question is what you'll do when you experience Michel Ancel's latest and greatest gaming creation that might just change your life; all the best games do. Playing a pre-alpha build of the game as the story begins to unfurl in real-time, it's apparent that Michel has dug deep to insure an experience that dwells in the mind as much as in the hand, integrating the elements of his protagonist's life directly into the control pad to be carried out by the player. The real-time graphics are stunning, the animation buttery smooth, the characters irresistible and the storytelling captivating on a spiritual level. Wondering where that next Zelda was going to come from? Well, wonder no more, this game will surpass those expectations, so savor every inch.

Although the game drops you directly into peril, the controls are so intuitive and the adventure so instantly palatable, it's as if you were sitting in a theater watching yourself progress through a grand Pixar adventure. Events move along briskly, introducing you to vivid characters and thrusting you into battles you'd expect at a game's end—mere setup for the epic journey ahead. Expect us to roll out the red carpet as soon as humanly possible.





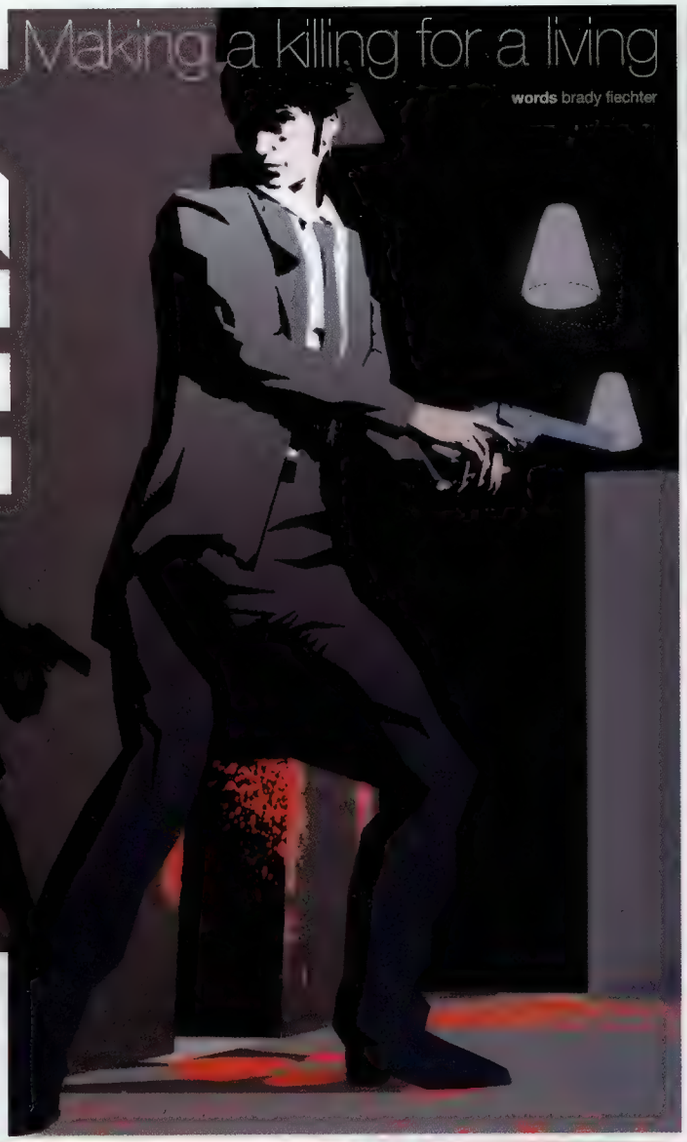
Scenes like the one pictured right courtesy of Michel Ancel—one of gaming's greatest artisans

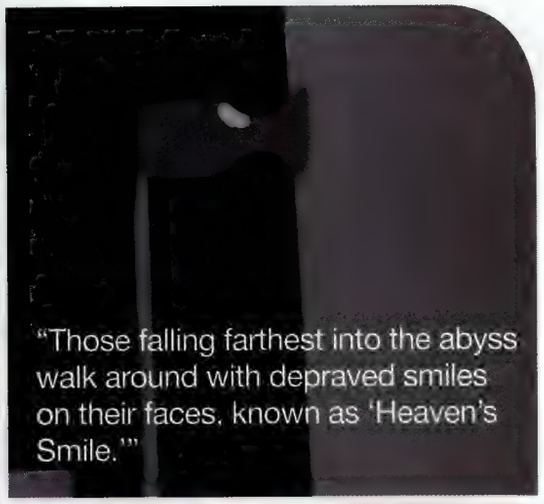
system: xbox, playstation 2, gamecube
developer: ubi soft
publisher: ubi soft
available: november

Killer 7

Making a killing for a living

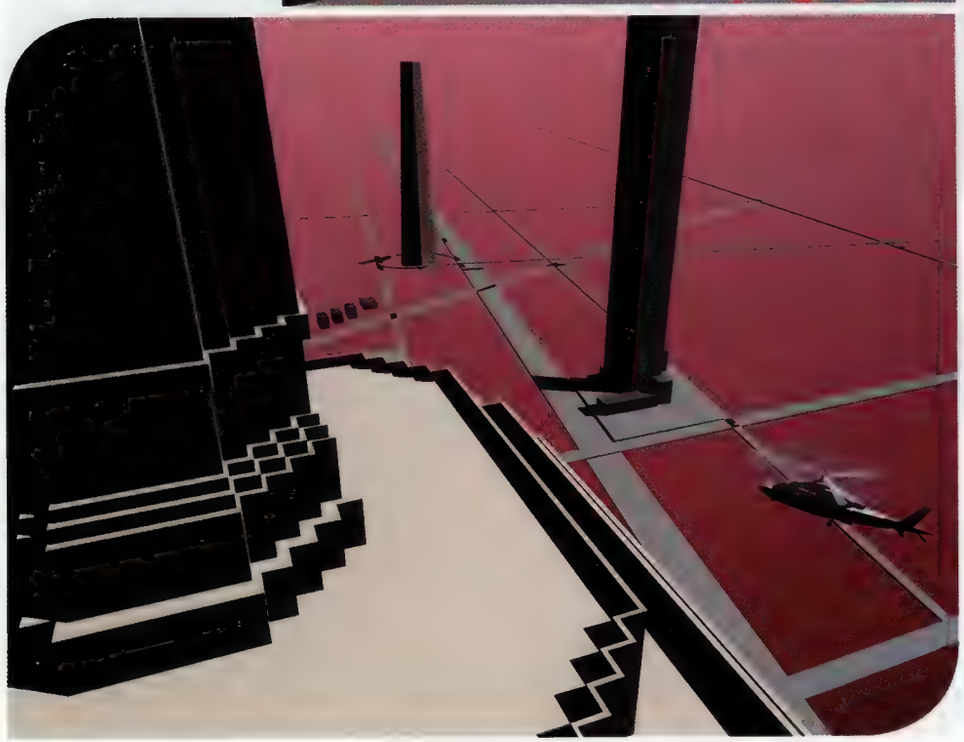
words brady fiechter





"Those falling farthest into the abyss walk around with depraved smiles on their faces, known as 'Heaven's Smile.'"

In a world hopelessly beleaguered by terrorism, those who do still have hope see it in the form of Harman Smith. How unlikely that a tortured assassin should become the savior, but leaning on his seven different personalities, Smith becomes a one-man exterminator of those who are "deserving to die." Smith would love nothing more than to keep to himself, drowning in his misery, but when his love is killed by an underworld leader of the terrorist cells, his duty becomes to end life at every turn. His disturbed psyche is actually manifested as distinct helpers in the pursuit for blood, showing different abilities necessary for the many hot spots Smith finds himself in. It would seem that the entire world is losing its mind. Those falling farthest into the abyss walk around with depraved smiles on their faces, known as the "Heaven's Smile." No one is remotely aware of their true intentions or what has caused this bizarre transformation, watching helplessly as the Jokeresque freaks join the armies of killers who terrorize the cities and bring death and destruction to anyone haplessly caught in their rage. Governments are falling, spearheaded by the leader of it all, Kun Lan. Your mission: assassinate Kun Lan. Welcome to the disturbingly dark world of Killer 7.





If the play is as unique as the visual style, Capcom has a groundbreaker on its hands

system: gamecube
developer: production studio 4
publisher: capcom
available: 2004

Final Fantasy X-2

With a dramatic shift in style and tone, the FF series goes for broke

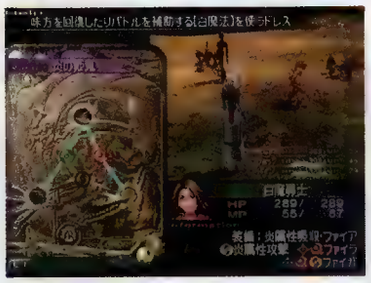
words brady fiechter

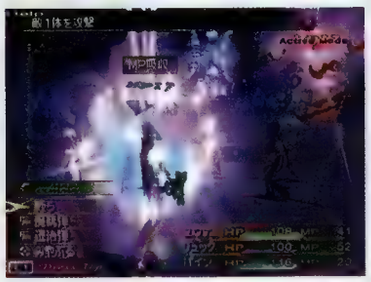
system: playstation 2
developer: square
publisher: square-enix usa
available: fall













"...you want to live in this game from the impact of its prologue alone."

The drama's battle system FF is known for has gotten even better

Let's review: Final Fantasy X-2 is the first direct sequel in a series that continues to reach uncommonly deep within the resonating heart of its followers, inhabiting an emotional space few games are capable of finding. X-2 shows no sign of complacency in the shadow of its aged heritage, balancing the excitingly fresh with the beautifully familiar. For every touch of Final Fantasy RPG classicism exists a stroke of modern charm, and once again, the progressively distinct artistry of Square stands tall; you want to live in this game from the impact of its prologue alone.

Wipe the bitter taste from your mouth if the stylistic shift in the typically safe Final Fantasy visual choices has you bristling. Much more will be said on X-2's aesthetics when the final review shows itself, but coming from someone who cringed at the initial screens and art from the game, playing is believing. When story, battle and the whole of the adventure work as one, you begin to see something extraordinary—an expected accomplishment in a series that has every reason to aggressively evolve. There's so much intrigue surrounding FFX-2, and still so much unknown.





Drakengard

An unusual melting pot of talent comes together to shake up the action-RPG genre

system: playstation 2
developer: cavia inc.
publisher: square enix
available: spring 2004



"For the bond to be complete, Caim must give up his ability to speak..."

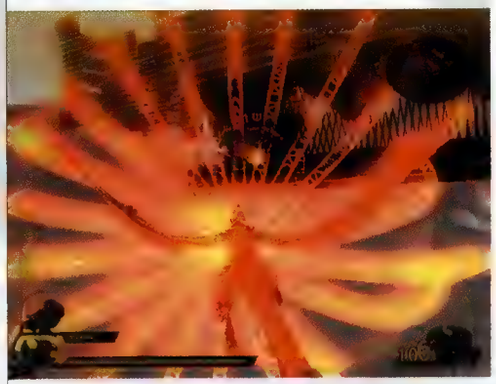
words brady fiechter

Influenced by Celtic mythology and other ancient European tales, its roots growing from a darker, more sinister source, Drakengard draws its conflict from storied tradition: Caim, a disillusioned prince of a small kingdom, stands in the middle of an intensifying enmity between the Empire and the Alliance. His castle compromised by a dramatic attack by the Empire, Caim futilely rushes to the aid of his kidnapped sister, Friae, who is branded with a sacred seal. Lacking the strength to infiltrate the castle, Caim is brutally wounded, forced to ally with a Red Dragon who, if not for sustaining injury from the battle, would never sacrifice its pride to aid a human. Here's where the setup finds a spark of intrigue: the two inherent foes form a pact, exchanging hearts, rendering them inseparable until death. For the bond to be complete, Caim must give up his ability to speak; the tattoo decorating his tongue is a symbol of his sacrifice.

The mythical power of the Red Dragon in his unwitting grasp, Caim begins his search for Friae through the air, unleashing fiery attacks in a flurry of chains and combinations. As the adventure matures, so does the power and ability of both Caim and his beast, who split time between the air and the ground. With an RPG lean, focusing on story and characterization, active dialogue occurs between both enemy and foe, taking the action through several distinct locations. Eventually, the entire land goes through an apocalyptic collapse, changing the complexity of the scenario. What causes this shift is still a mystery, but its inclusion and comments from the developers point to the story taking terribly dark turns.

When Caim battles the enemy on the ground, he can reach for eight weapons that can be upgraded through accrued experience as many as eight times. Whether you're taking to the air or hacking it out across the rich landscape, Drakengard maintains a furious sense of action and intensity. Inevitable comparisons have been drawn to Panzer Dragoon—and indeed, the multiple-enemy lock-on targeting seems birthed from Sega's classic—but in other ways, the look and feel are quite removed. Most notably, the game is more open and directly controllable, allowing full 360-degree flight; a number of the 100-plus team actually hail from Ace Combat and Ridge Racer. Even the Tekken music talent are handling the classically influenced score.

Other notables on the project include Yasuhito Watanabe (Bust-a-Groove), Kazuya Sasahara (CG director, Resident Evil Code: Veronica) and Hiroyuki Hayashida (CG producer, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*). With their storybook of magic and spells, of betrayal and inseparable valor, Drakengard becomes one of the more distinctly attractive titles approaching for the new year.









There is obviously a heavy action element to the game, but the storytelling is paramount

Need For Speed Underground

Apparently more fast and furious than any other racer

words tom ham



system: ps2, xb, gc, pc, gba
developer: electronic arts black box
publisher: electronic arts
available: fall

"I live my life a quarter mile at a time. Nothing else matters...for those 10 seconds or less, I'm free." Those words are from the Book of Dominic Toretto and it perfectly captures the essence of what urban street racing represents. It is this world that Electronic Arts wants you to be a part of. A world unlike any other. This is Need for Speed Underground.

Whether you're new to the gaming scene or have been in it for centuries, more than likely, you've played a Need of Speed game. Whether it was on the 3DO (yikes), the original PlayStation or PC, what I and most people usually remember most about the series were not the tracks or locations but the licensed cars. More like dream cars than real cars, you could always count on Electronic Arts to bring the cream of the crop to their NFS games. I mean, come on: where else could you drive a McLaren F1?

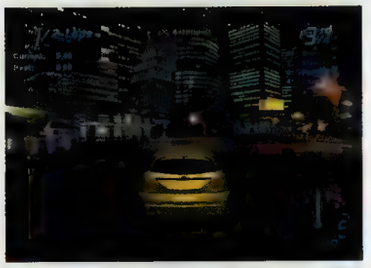
For NFS Underground, the developers decided to go in a different direction. Say goodbye to the Ferraris, Aston Martins and Porsches. They're outta here. Cruising into their spots will be Mitsubishi, Nissan and Toyota. Now before you start to cry, take my word for it. Listen to Dominic. This game is going to rock. "I think anyone who pays attention to popular culture or the interests of kids could see this one coming a mile away," explains Chuck Osieja, executive producer at EA Black Box. "*The Fast and the Furious* just blew the lid off of the tuner scene by exposing it to people up on the big screen. It wasn't created by the movie; it just made more people aware of it. The idea of Need for Speed branching out into the tuner culture is really a logical one. Although every kid aspires to own a Ferrari or Lamborghini, the reality is that most of us will never have the coin to park one in our driveway. What everyone can afford to do is to pick up an inexpensive used car (or get a hand me down from the 'rents) and then modify $100-$200 at a time. Tuner cars are frankensteined together over months or years, but the end results are sometimes more impressive than what you could get on a Porsche or Ferrari. The similarities to the Need for Speed line are all there. The difference is, instead of state-of-the-art, highly tuned European exotic cars, NFS Underground is about state-of-the-art, highly tuned Urban Exotics. It feels like a fresh direction that stays true to the Need for Speed heritage."

Underground is split up into four gameplay modes: Career, Quick Race, Multiplayer and Online. Players will spend most of their time in Career mode. Here you will build a car from the ground up and earn respect of other riders. The more you win, the more you can build your car up. Soon your reputation will begin to rise and with that comes bigger races with bigger purses. The ultimate goal in Career mode is to become the best street racer in the city. I know a lot of people have compared Midnight Club II to Underground, saying it's the same type of thing. Then again, NFSU is a game offering real, licensed cars and a garage-load of customization.

And speaking of customization, there are literally hundreds of ways to trick out your ride, and in true EA fashion, all of the aftermarket parts have been licensed. Some of the companies include Audiobahn, Bilstein, Dazz Motorsport, Eibach, Enkei, MOMO, Neuspeed, Sparco and StreetGlow. "The car customization is one of the major focuses of the product. It's not just a marketing bullet point for the back of the box," continues Osieja. "It's something we've taken great care to get right. I wouldn't compare what we're doing in Underground to what anyone has done in a driving game to this point—it just wouldn't be fair. One of the guys on the team calculated how many different ways you could build out just one of the 20 cars in the game. The number was over 71 billion [yes, that is with a B]."




We have three words about the level of detail in these screenshots: oh my God.





Ninja Gaiden

Seriously, how can you even compare this monster to the original?

system: xbox
developer: team ninja
publisher: tecmo
available: november

words brady fiechter

A colleague and I were, yet again, lamenting the loss of huge challenge in games, remembering how not so long ago games got our hearts pounding from the rush of knowing one wrong move would lead to immediate disaster. I'm not one to criticize modern game design, but I have to admit that most of the heart-pounding today comes from exciting scripted scenarios and gorgeous displays for my eyes. When that rare challenge does exist, you feel the power of defeat breathing down your neck, addictively fighting to maintain the precision skill to plow forward; this is one of the big reasons online combat is so much fun, because no AI in the world packs the same feel of the human touch coming at you.

Any time a conversation like this occurs, Ninja Gaiden invariably gets a mention. If you've been on the gaming scene for a while now, surely you remember the entertaining pain of dissecting the insanely challenging levels that even then were exceptional. With this long-awaited sequel, only time will tell if Tecmo has decided to maintain a classic level of intensity, but from what I've seen so far, this is exactly what you would want in a modern update. Gameplay hinges on two basic button commands, calling on a primary and secondary attack scheme involving combo opportunities that could reach as high as the triple digits. Upgrades will be possible throughout the quest, adding to an enormous arsenal of skills and weapons, and it's up to you to decide where you want to focus your strengths. It's evident the moment you set eyes on the game where Team Ninja is placing the focus: assaultingly swift action and character movement wrapped in a combo-heavy package. Simply watching Ryu dance up walls, the camera positioned for the utmost dramatic impact, is awesome.

I've really only seen Ninja Gaiden in tiny bits and pieces; Team Ninja loves to drop juicy hints at what's to come, painting the game in a bold light. When you look at their track record and listen to always-vocal project leader Tomonobu Itagaki convince you of just how far the team is going to craft the quintessential action title, it's hard not to agree already.



"Simply watching Ryu dance up walls, the camera positioned for the utmost dramatic impact, is awesome."





What you can't see here is the way everything moves; the animation is a high point







The Lord of the Rings

The Return of The King

system: ps2, xbox, gc
developer: hypnos entertainment
publisher: ea
available: november

words brady fiechter

Showing how movie games are done

For all its undeniable shortcomings, The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers humbled any film-inspired game before it. Anyone approaching their own movie-to-game designs who doesn't borrow direct ideas from the way the game was inventively crafted simply will not succeed on this same level. And here comes the sequel—bolder, bigger, better.

If you played the first game, you experienced one of the most visually striking games to date. The Return of the King is even more of a rush to look at, pumping up the textures, the art, the action, the chaos. But this was to be expected. More satisfying to see is the insistence on creating a much richer gameplay experience, relying on improvements like more playable characters, settings that hold interaction and far less rigidity, more involved combat and cooperative play—the most egregious omission from the first game. It seems that nearly every aspect of Return of the King is receiving an added layer of depth; everything seems improved, even the things that didn't need improving. The basic advancement in the team understanding the hardware has a large part to play in enriching the experience, but the smaller touches like being able to climb ladders and ropes and travel across several story arcs really show the difference in ambition. No matter how good this game looks, and there's really little to draw comparison from; the surface adventure of The Two Towers just would not do. Here's how you work a true sequel.





Is it even possible to cram any more activity onscreen? This game surrounds you with endless chaos



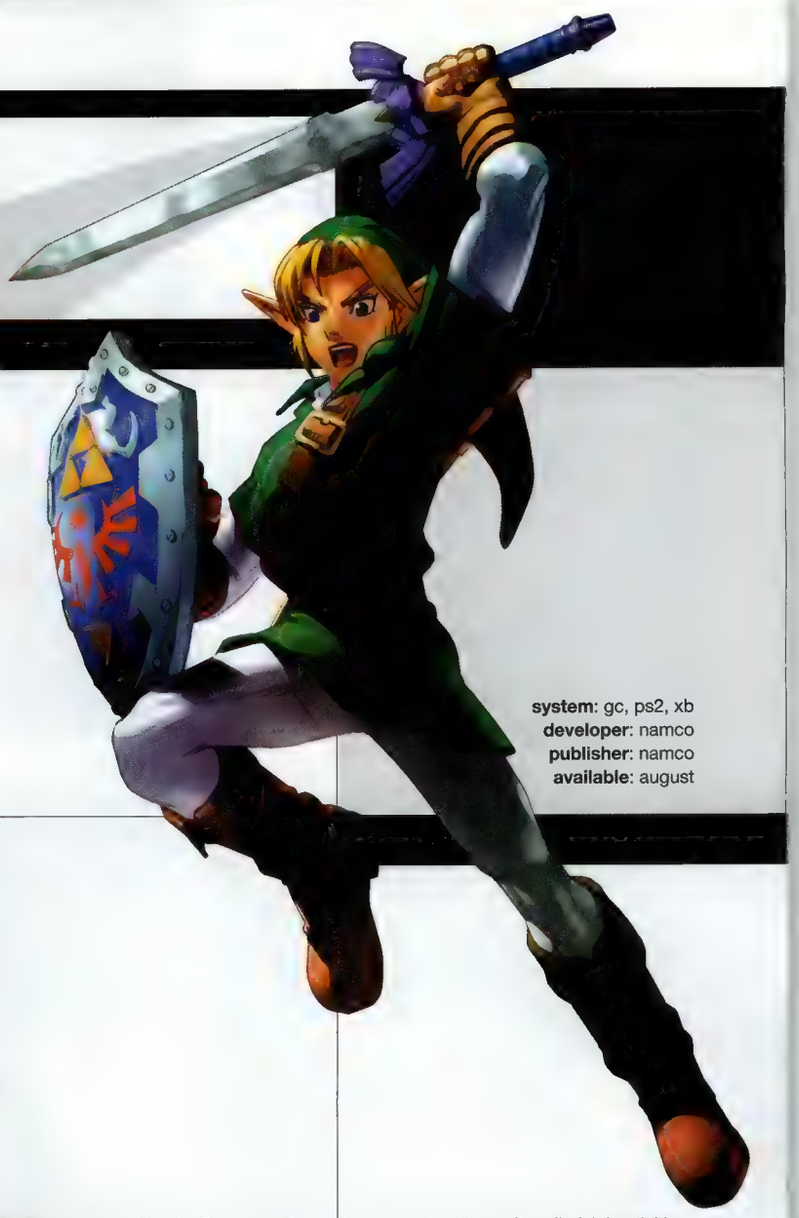
"RotK is even more of a rush to look at, pumping up the textures, the art, the action, the chaos."



Soul Calibur II

There's only one question: is it as good as the previous Soul Calibur?

words brady fiechter



system: gc, ps2, xb
developer: namco
publisher: namco
available: august





When a game like the Dreamcast's four-year-old Soul Calibur carries the reputation of a masterpiece, the amped scrutiny accompanying a sequel is just part of the territory. Imagine the demands placed on the talents striving to one-up such an accomplishment. For the many who consider Soul Calibur the best 3D fighter out there, myself included, this sequel had to flirt with perfection to share the same impact. With the advancement in hardware and development experience, it's a bit disappointing that Soul Calibur 2 didn't quite meet the challenge.

But oh, how second best will do! Here we go again, given a 3D fighter with 2D speed and precision, built with masterful skill and incredible depth. The way this thing flows and moves avoids an awareness of the artificial connection that can sometimes exist between what you are doing with the controller and what you are seeing as a result. After several hours of play to properly understand the game's technique, the technique part gives way to a natural, absolutely brilliant sense of instinct. I love just watching this game, admiring the animation and movement, feeling the weight and density of the fighters as they parry and strike. If Namco tinkered much with the gameplay, I haven't really felt it, sticking with my favorite fighters and their familiar moves; what differences are here are subtle, and if anything, with a more dramatic guard-parry component, the game ultimately feels slightly better.

Remove the comparisons to the groundbreaking Soul Calibur and this sequel would have a bigger impact in its look. Newcomers and Soul Calibur faithfuls alike will admire the spirited 16th-century atmosphere in the generous array of stages, but there is an artistry and appeal lost from before. The music, as good as it is, also lacks the mood of the past game. The game is brighter and more self-aware of its style, taking some minor missteps in a few of the design choices: Takki's breasts are just plain silly looking, and some of the characters have replaced menace and sophistication with a flair for the garish.

Of the 23 main characters, 13 return, touched up in individual ways. Outside the strength of the core fighting engine, discovering new fighters and outfitting them, buying them weapons and unlocking their stages, becomes a real draw to the single-player experience. Weapon Master mode is where a good deal of the rewards reside, allowing you to take the fighter of

"...a 3D fighter with 2D speed and precision, built with masterful skill and incredible depth."







your choice on an adventure across the land to earn experience and gold. The weapons you buy do make a difference: pick a more lethal blade and your guard may be diminished; choose a longer reach and your speed of attack is lost. Once again, the Weapon Master quest is not nearly as challenging and satisfying as the similar Mission mode in Soul Calibur, but extremely well done in its own right; just don't be surprised if you quickly begin fast-forwarding the meandering text. True, Soul Calibur 2 does not demand an exceptional understanding of play like, say, Virtua Fighter, revealing its depths more casually and with less focus on technical proficiency. Combos come out swift and satisfying, exciting a new player for instant gratification. But jump in with the big boys and your ass is toast. It could be argued that the other great 3D fighters out there offer a similar level of accomplishment as Soul Calibur 2, but no way will my voice be a part of that opinion; this game dominates.

So which game do you buy? Much has been said about the inclusion of Haihachi (PS2), Spawn (Xbox) and Link (GC) as playable characters. Link is the most natural and appealing presence of the three and easily the most fun to play, but, of course, chalk that up to nothing more than preference. Perhaps more time should have been spent replacing the boring, static endings for each fighter with the dazzling CG Namco is known for instead of including gimmick characters.

Preference is something important to keep in mind when looking at the whole of the Soul Calibur 2 experience. A score is kind of irrelevant for a game like this—outside of the original, there's nothing else out there I would rather play—and any differences between the three systems and even its predecessor are viewed through a very subjective lens. I hated playing with the GameCube controller, immediately turning to the PS2; my friend swore by the Xbox and its hardware polish. Whatever the choice may be, make sure it involves owning this incredibly engaging 3D fighter.



SWAT
Global Strike Team

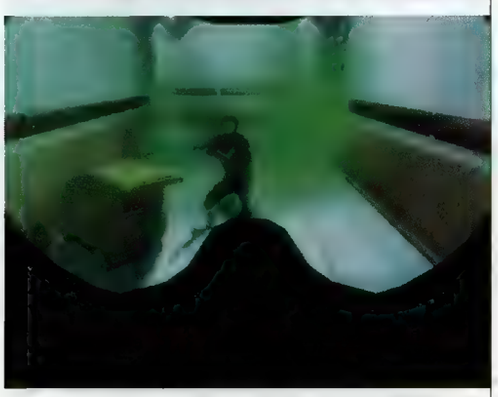
An entirely new way of looking at the first-person action game

words brady fiechter

system: ps2, xbox, pc
developer: argonaut
publisher: vu games
available: october



You squat behind a beam, silently hiding from two terrorists making their security sweep across a narrow catwalk above. Lighting is low, obscuring visibility just enough that you decide to switch to night vision to track your enemies' movement. If this were a typical first-person shooter, you'd focus your sniper rifle between the eyes and shoot, relying on the element of surprise for the one up. But this is far from your typical death-run of cover-and-fire first-person action. The situation demands cool assessment, calculated strategy and unusual consequence. Opting for a gas grenade and the protection of a mask, you jump into the controlled confusion with well-placed shots to the legs and—get this—slap handcuffs on your incapacitated victim. The raid is a success, because you've ultimately saved innocents imprisoned within the building *and* spared most the suspects.



Your toolset is limited, sticking with the essentials you'd turn to in a real-life situation; the gas mask often comes in handy



In SWAT: Global Strike Team, you're under the command of an elite international law-enforcement organization that does not tolerate wanton force. This is a modern-day, reality-based backdrop where only a few weapons and essential tools are at your disposal, and using them requires the precision and motive you'd expect if really faced with these extreme situations. To kill without provocation leads to harsh penalty, bringing an entirely unique dimension to the missions. There are more than enough moments where you just have to unload in sake of your team's safety, but even then you have to contend with such factors as panicking hostages and other sensitive environmental hazards. Working side by side with two other SWAT members, one trained as a sniper, the other an equipment technician, you bark orders either with the D-pad or voice headset, diffusing tactical danger zones and swarming the enemy through aggressive teamwork. If the enemy is willing to listen, he'll throw up his arms as a gauge pops over his head, redlining when fear is at a peak. If you're not quick—adrenaline-soaked distractions can appear without warning— the enemy might decide to flee and turn what you thought was a safe zone into a blood bath. The relentless visceral thrill of a straightforward FPS still remains, but there's no denying the genre needs to head new places. SWAT: Global Strike Team is leading the charge.

> "The raid is a success because you've ultimately saved innocents *and* spared most the suspects."







What you can't see in the screen is just how expansive the mountain is

"The music will all be delivered via an in-game satellite radio station..."



SSX 3

Taking snowboarding to the next level

words tom ham

From the looks of things, 2003 is going to be a banner year for snowboarding titles. With 1080: Avalanche and Amped 2 coming out, things just wouldn't be right if there wasn't a new SSX title in there too. Lucky for us there will be. At a recent press event at Electronic Arts headquarters, I had the opportunity to make my way down a beautiful snow covered mountain with the latest build of the game. Coming out this fall on all the major platforms (including Game Boy Advance), SSX 3 is going to change everything you've come to know about snowboarding games.

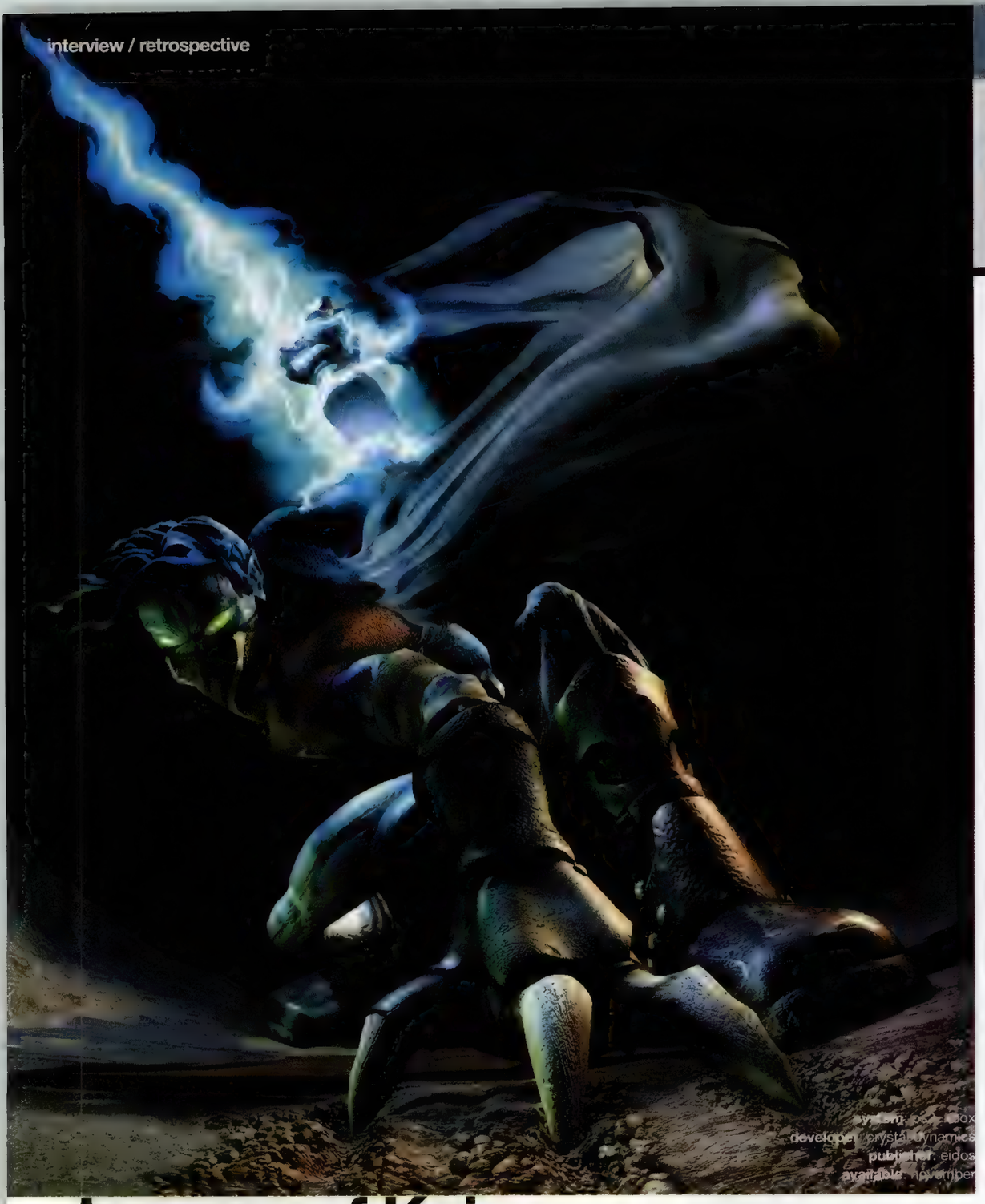
No one can question the impact that SSX and SSX Tricky has had on the industry and all of us who have played either game. They not only showed how much fun snowboarding could be, but how accessible it could be for almost anyone. From the layout of the tracks to the colorful characters to the brilliantly easy trick system, it was the game that truly brought snowboarding to the masses. How does EA Sports BIG plan on topping it? I spoke with SSX 3 Producer, Larry LaPierre, for a few answers. "The easier question would be, what aren't we doing," explains LaPierre. "This year the SSX Tour is taking over the most intimidating mountain you have ever been on. It's not just about beating other riders in the events; you also have to survive what the mountain throws down. You will have the opportunity to ride from the top of Peak 3, all the way to the lower valley. It will take close to 30 minutes to complete. The events have been expanding to include Big Airs, SuperPipes and SlopeStyle as well as the usual Race events. We have improved all of the animations to give a greater sense of control, more speed, better tricks and more combo depth [gasping for breath] We've also added new riders, more customization, hundreds of rewards, online play, bragging rights for multiplayer games and a kitchen sink...ok, everything except the kitchen sink."

The heart and soul of SSX 3 is going to be Conquer the Mountain mode. Veering away from menus and restricted gameplay, the developers wanted to give the player the utmost in freedom. So the whole game is basically a freeride: players explore the mountain by doing the over 150 challenges and entering competitions to earn coins and trophies. There are three peaks you will need to master on your way to conquering the mountain. This approach is utterly unique and what's going to set SSX 3 apart from the competition.

The playable characters in SSX Tricky really made the game a fun (and sometimes laugh out loud) experience. For SSX 3, the developers really wanted to create characters that players would remember and talk about after they finished playing. "The characters have always been a big focus for us," says LaPierre. "They need to be memorable, in either a good or bad way. This year there are four new riders—Nate, Allegra, Griff and Viggo—and six are returning veterans: Kaori, Mac, Elise, Psymon, Zoe and Moby. All the other veterans will be making special appearances and possibly be earned as cheat characters."

The graphics in SSX 3 are...well, I'll let the screenshots speak for themselves. And here is a little piece of trivia for you. The art team on SSX 3 is lead by an Oscar-nominated visual effects artist. Ummm, yeah, can you say, "Don't mess with EA?"

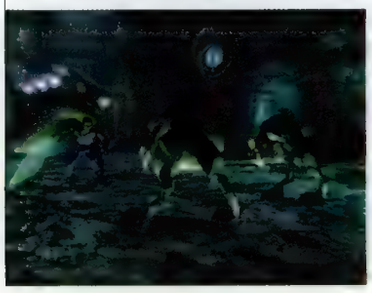
And of course, an SSX game wouldn't be an SSX game without a kick ass soundtrack and this latest will have thumping tracks that will make your sub-woofer work overtime. "We've got an amazing soundtrack blending hip-hop, techno and alternative rock, including some exclusive tracks and remixes you won't hear anywhere else," says LaPierre. "The music will all be delivered via an in-game satellite radio station, and all the songs in the game will be available for sale in the game. If you hear a song you like, you can buy the .mp3 in the game and upload it into your character's PDA to create your own custom playlists." Now that is dope.



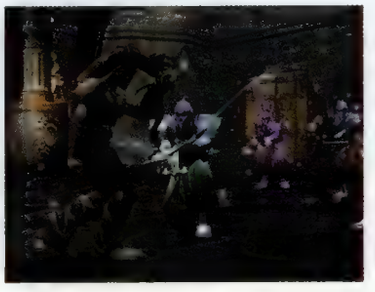
Legacy of Kain
Defiance

words brady fiechter

Addressing past flaws and building high on the strengths, this game will intoxicate fans of the series







interview



Amy Hennig Director

play: So you've been involved with the Legacy of Kain series from the start, right?
Amy Hennig: *Nearly* from the start – I joined Crystal Dynamics in mid-'95, and contributed to Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain during its last year or so of production. In the seven years since, I've directed the Soul Reaver games, and now Legacy of Kain: Defiance.

What's your favorite so far?
That's a tough question, but I'd have to say the first Soul Reaver – maybe just for nostalgic reasons. We were working from such a blank slate – in terms of technology, story and game design – and taking on so many challenges, it made the development very exciting. Sometimes harrowing, but always exhilarating.

What have you taken from the past games that you've been able to apply to this latest in the series?
With each game, we try to change things up – both to keep the games feeling fresh, and to keep ourselves interested and challenged. Some of these experiments pay off, and some don't. After SR2, we felt that we hadn't gotten the balance right between story and gameplay. Character and story have always been – and continue to be – critically important in the series, but too often the cinematics overwhelmed the gameplay, slowing the pace of the game.
With Defiance, we set out to make the game more accessible, by reinventing a few key areas of the design. Now, our diehard fans may balk at this, assuming it means we've watered down the experience to make it more mass-market – but this isn't the case. Our goal was to preserve and enhance those features which have been hallmarks of the series – like compelling environments and level design, intelligent story, and stellar voice acting – while overhauling the weaker elements. We've cranked up the action components of the gameplay, and relied more on combat and the characters' physical mechanics in our level designs.

Sequels are big in this industry and not always easy to pull off. What can you do to keep things fresh and new?
Sequels are good business, but creatively risky. As in movies, it's difficult to satisfy – or surpass – the expectations of your audience. I think it's important to really hear and digest the feedback from critics and fans, to understand what was successful about your previous product, and what needs to be improved. In games, the state-of-the-art changes so rapidly – both in terms of technology and design – that you can't rest on your laurels and just crank out more of the same. It's critical to understand and preserve your game's fundamental principles, but then continually reinvent the experience by improving mechanics and adding features,

and being courageous enough to throw away outdated elements.

The game is gorgeous.
We've got two key advantages: incredibly talented artists, and a game engine that empowers them to unleash their talents. We create our environments using standard tools like 3DSMax and PhotoShop, so the artists aren't limited by the artificial restrictions of a world editor – only by the limits imposed by memory and framerate. And these limits are fairly generous, because our programmers have really harnessed the power of the PS2. With their optimizations, we're rendering three or four times more detail than in SR2, while still sustaining a constant 60fps framerate.

I remember when I spoke with you as work was being done on Soul Reaver for PSone, and we talked about your level designers being architects—how they're not just building blocks, but worlds.
Right, I remember that. And it's still true, two games later – we blueprint all our levels out, and the artists and designers use tons of architectural and photo reference when planning and building the levels. Our goal is to provide compelling, believable environments that completely immerse the player in the world.

Is your focus still on a lots of story? I hope you're not dropping great dialogue for more action.
The goal is to deliver both, and provide a more balanced game experience. The story is still the spine of the game, but now the player's experience is driven much more by action and conflict. There are still puzzles to be solved, but we've tried to incorporate the characters' action mechanics into the layout even more—for instance, by requiring the player to jump, climb, glide, use telekinesis, employ the Reaver blade, and shift between the spectral and material realms to solve problems. And combat is a more dramatic and satisfying aspect of the game experience than before. Kain and Raziel face more enemies, and have a richer suite of combat mechanics, than in previous games.

On the story subject: do you think games benefit from more cinema, more characters and storytelling?
Well, it's a matter of personal preference – some people love complex story games, some hate them. I think the game experience is enhanced by deep characters, a well-told story, and cinematics in appropriate proportions – but since games are such a young medium, we (as developers) rarely get the balance right. We're getting better, though, as the medium matures.

Talk a bit about what you did with the camera system. You've seemed to have opened it up a lot, allowing for so much more visual enjoyment.
We were fairly proud of our old camera system, but felt that we'd taken the idea of a "loose" follow-camera as far as we could. Because so many action/adventure games have adopted the same camera model, there's a risk of uniformity – they all start to look the same after a while.
The old camera model also has a tendency to limit the player's perception of the world – we're trying to tell stories with epic scope, but the follow-camera diminishes and confines the perceived scale of the game world. Finally, the follow-camera model requires the player to constantly manage the camera in order to traverse the world— this isn't gameplay, it's just a burden.
We wanted to do away with all these limitations, so we devised a much more seamless, cinematic game camera system. The camera follows the action smoothly, tracking to present the best possible view of the action or layout, without feeling locked down...

"I think the game experience is enhanced by deep characters, a well-told story, and cinematics in appropriate proportions – but since games are such a young medium, we (as developers) rarely get the balance right."

How do Kain and Raziel's gameplay paths differ?
The characters share a basic control scheme, so the player can transition seamlessly between them from chapter to chapter, without having to readjust. Having said that, they each also have a set of unique mechanics, which differentiate them from each other – only Raziel can glide, or shift between the spectral and material realms, for example, while only Kain can perform vampiric leaps across wide chasms. These differences enhance the gameplay without disorienting the player.
Both characters may visit the same location over the course of the game, but their traversal of the area will differ based on their unique mechanics and weaknesses.

One of the leads on the team spoke highly of ICO and Devil May Cry as influences.
Sure, we always study our competitors' games, both to dissect what's compelling about them, and to avoid repeating their mistakes. While Devil May Cry may not offer the deepest experience, we were impressed by how satisfying and intuitive their combat mechanics were. When we set out to redesign our combat system, we knew that our mechanics needed to be just as pick-up-and-playable, responsive and dramatic. ICO is just a brilliant game – I know it's a matter of taste, and some people didn't care for it, but we were struck by how evocative the game world is, and what a huge role the camera played in conveying the atmosphere.

Who is writing the script? I've always been so impressed with the dialogue in the series.
Thanks – I've written the story and dialogue for Defiance in collaboration with Carol Wolf, who also co-wrote Blood Omen 2. We've tried to keep things a little snappier this time around – preserving all the depth and intrigue, but injecting more action into the scenes, and trying to excise as much ponderous exposition as possible...



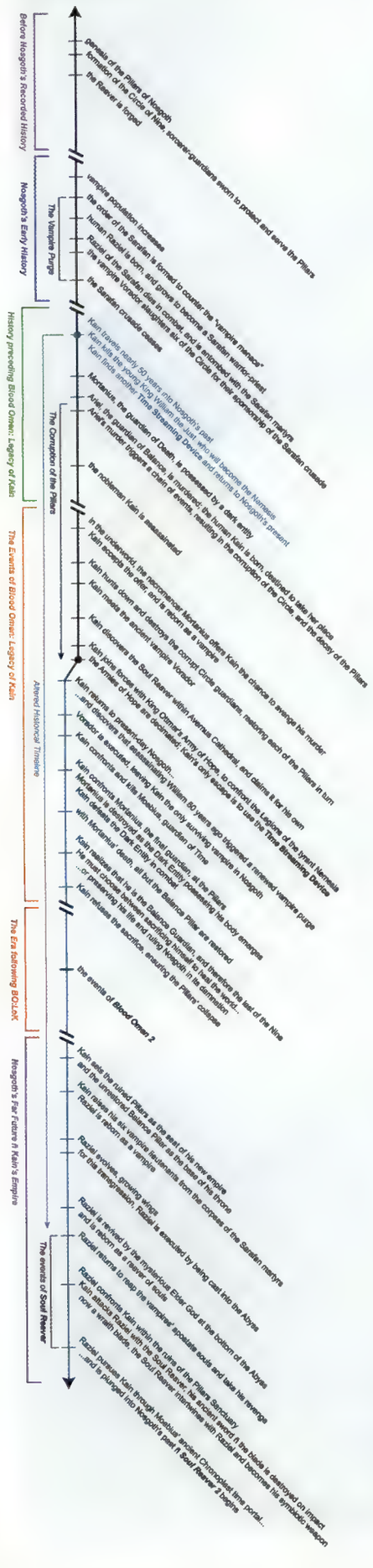
Where would you like to take this series from here?
After Defiance, we can pretty much take the series in any direction; it's wide open. I can't be too specific about possible directions, of course, without giving away Defiance's plot… but there are lot of threads we can follow, and a rich mythology to mine for further games.
I really like the automatic locking system during combat... It's much more intuitive than our previous combat controls. Rather than requiring the player to hold a lock-on button throughout combat (which tends to be sort of awkward and cramp-inducing), we interpret the player's intention by their actions. If they launch an attack, we assume they want to be in combat mode – if they want to get out of combat, it's a simple matter to toggle back to standard gameplay mode. This integrates combat much more fluidly into the game, and frees the player up to choreograph his attack moves and combos.

The team admitted to some pitfalls with SR2. What kind of new challenges have you faced on this project?
Yeah, we made sort of an eleventh-hour decision to move SR2 to the PS2, so most of our coding efforts went into porting our game engine to the new hardware. This time out, technology really hasn't been a major hurdle – so the programmers have finally had the bandwidth to make all the improvements to the game engine that they would have liked to have included in SR2, if we'd had the time. They've optimized or overhauled most of the major game systems, improving performance, rendering power, special effects, play mechanics, cinematics… just about everything you could imagine.
So our obstacles this time were more conceptual than technical. Balancing the story and gameplay between two alternating protagonists, overhauling the combat system, and developing our camera system were probably our greatest design challenges.

Who's more badass: Kain or Raziel?
Well, of course I think they're both awesome characters... but if I'm going to be honest, I'd have to say Kain. His sense of irony gives him the edge.



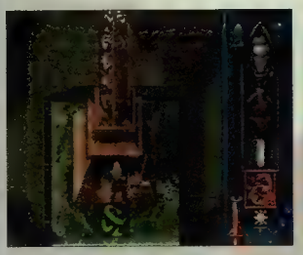
Timeline



The Games

Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain

system: ps
developer: silicon knights
publisher: activision
available: 1996



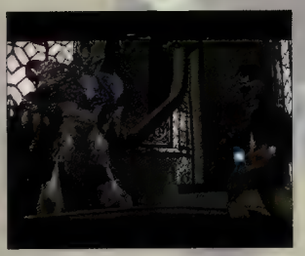


Here's where it all began, the birth of Kain and his eternal thirst for blood. The Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen came at a time when mature themes were rarely this sophisticated and compellingly packaged, allowing the game to command an even stronger hold with its shock and beautifully dark artistry. The game was enormous in scope and filled with some of the richest dialogue in gaming, playing off its adventure and role-playing elements better than any game in the series to follow. Load times were a pain, but fans of the series were able to look past the flaws and soak in the intoxicating mood.

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver

system: ps, dc
developer: crystal dynamics
publisher: eidos
available: 1999





Arguably the best game in the series—even director Amy Hennig recalls it as her favorite—but still a step behind Blood Omen in my book. With Raziel as the lead this time around and a remarkable, fully 3D presentation, the game was really an entirely different monster, and a wildly immersive one at that. Gliding Raziel from ledge to ledge was an awesome feeling, and the puzzle solving was smart and played well within the logic of the universe. And yet again, the plot movement was gripping, with splendid voice acting and superb dialogue marking one of the best stories in gaming.

Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver 2

system: ps2
developer: crystal dynamics
publisher: eidos
available: 2001



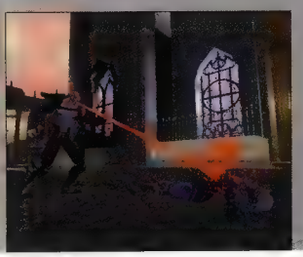


While it had its strengths, Soul Reaver 2 felt more like the start of a great game, missing important moments like boss battles and enough involving puzzles to help soften the missteps. The game looked fantastic considering the time of its release, but there was no ignoring the feeling that the team was still dealing with the constraints of new hardware. Like both games before it, Soul Reaver 2 stood tall with its storytelling, continuing the plight of Raziel and his struggle to confront Kain. I have to admit, whatever its faults—some balked at the ponderous pacing of the story—the game kept me hooked.

Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen 2

system: xbox
developer: crystal dynamics
publisher: eidos
available: 2002





Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen 2 once again dwelled in Kain's home land of Nosgoth, where darkness fell as heavy as ever. With Kain taking center stage, the bloodsucking gameplay was undeniably entertaining yet not nearly as startling and satisfying. The story was toned down drastically from Soul Reaver 2, focusing more on the adventure and action, and the boss battles were quite cool. Taking place primarily in the City of Meridian, the game built its atmosphere from a slightly different angle, becoming less abstract and more slum Goth.

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles

Ten years later, Nintendo gets another Final Fantasy, and it's even multiplayer

words brady fiechter

Some games challenge for their appeal. Some games excite in their fantasy. Some games breed serious competition with friends. If anyone tells you games can't possibly pack emotion, have no capacity to enrich our lives, tell them they have no imagination. The rest of us can recall that moment a game spoke directly to us in a personal way, tickling our senses with that ineffable rush we like to call feeling. But how rare it is that a game moves us. My short list includes the first Tomb Raider, Symphony of the Night, Super Metroid, ICO. Add to that thin upper tier Final Fantasy IX, my favorite in the finest RPG series out there.

What sparks my interest in Crystal Chronicles most intensely is a traditional visual style that returns to the warmth and spirit of FFIX. There is one moment in the game, so quiet and delightful, where a fireplace casts its beautiful glow on a room of travelers who could only exist in the freedom of a dream. There goes that feeling.

Now that community has become a big part of the gaming experience, Crystal Chronicles invites you to share in its world with three of your friends. The camaraderie will be made possible only through linking up with GBAs, which display party stats, inventories and commands. Whether in a group or on your own, the path traveled is essentially the same. As a team, you'll work together to solve puzzles, disarm traps, gather items and defeat the countless creatures stalking the land. It's very important to stay tightly together; if one of the party members strays outside the designated magical circle of support, damage will be dealt.

Crystal Chronicles is in many ways a dramatic departure from the familiar turn-based, presentation-heavy structure that marks the series. Battles are immediate and more action-based, and endless story development isn't a big focus. Given its heritage and the fanatic response to the even-more progressive Final Fantasy XI, bets are on Crystal Chronicles writing a wonderfully different chapter in a book that shows no ending in sight.



"What sparks my interest in Crystal Chronicles most intensely is a traditional visual style that returns to the warmth and spirit of FFIX"

The return to traditional fantasy is a welcome one, matching nicely with the new turn of gameplay







system: gamecube
developer: game designer's studio/square enix
publisher: nintendo
available: january





Halo Combat Evolved

PC gamers no longer have to look on with envy, the greatest first-person shooter ever is on its way

words tom ham

system: pc
developer: gearbox software
publisher: microsoft games
available: fall

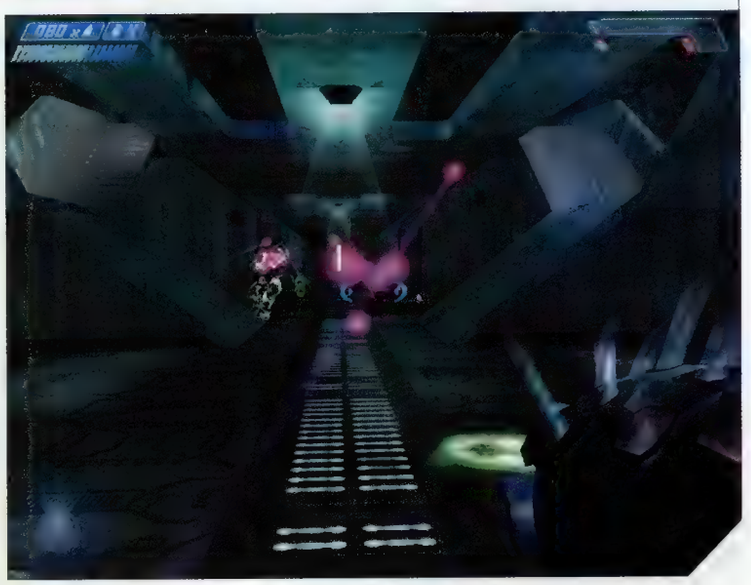
When a video game sells through a couple hundred thousand units (and depending on its production budget), that's usually a good indication that it was definitely a hit. Now take that same train of thought and imagine selling more than three million units in less than two years; now that's something to smile about. You can bet when Microsoft acquired Bungie (the creators and developers of Halo), all the Xbox folks were grinning from ear to ear.

Later this month, Microsoft, along with Bungie and Gearbox Software, are going to finally release the PC version of Halo. What's interesting is that Halo: Combat Evolved was originally *supposed* to have been on the Macintosh. Then it got shifted to PC and now it's on Xbox. Some thought the game would never see the light of day on PC.

Thankfully, it's coming and I couldn't be more stoked. Exciting, yes, but come on, how much better could it be? I was running the Xbox version in high-definition already, what could bringing it to the PC do? Well...plenty.

Halo: Combat Evolved is being developed by Gearbox Software, industry veterans of the first-person action genre. With their prior track record of excellent titles like Opposing Force and Blue Shift for Half-Life, I was pleased to hear Gearbox was at the helm for Halo.

"Halo: Combat Evolved is our favorite Xbox game," explains Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox Software. "When we discovered that a PC version wasn't in development, we were disappointed—we like our mice and keyboard and we love our high resolution monitors and high-end graphics capabilities. We wanted Halo to have those advantages. When we talked to Bungie and discovered that they really wanted a PC version but couldn't find the right team to do it, we were surprised—it couldn't be *that* hard, could it? When they told us they thought we were the right team for the job, the only team for the







It's the Halo we know and love—now online and looking better than ever

job, we were honored and flattered. The biggest challenges have been re-writing the networking, graphics, input and audio engines without having anything *seem* different with the game. That's a hard, big job. I'm proud of the work the guys at Gearbox and Bungie have done."

So you're probably asking right now, "What has changed from the Xbox version?" In terms of the single player campaign—nothing. It's the exact same game as the Xbox version, which, to be quite honest, is definitely a good thing. "The narrative mode has been carefully preserved," continues Pitchford. "We're going to have two kinds of customers with this game: 1) People who have never played Halo and own PCs, and 2) People who have played the Xbox version and love it. For the first group, it's our duty to provide them the same award-winning campaign mode as purely as possible—only enhanced where the PC shines (input options and high-end graphics). For the second group, we offer the first time they can play the game properly over the Internet and we offer exclusive new multiplayer features, maps, weapons and vehicles, and we will support the mod community with tools and 'how-tos.'"

Moving to the PC definitely has its advantages. Sure the game looked great on Xbox, but watching it on my PC monitor, it was a whole different experience. Not only were the colors brighter but had more depth, characters were sharper looking and the vehicles showed off more intricate detail. "Shawn Green re-wrote all of the pixel shaders for DirectX 9 to conform to the 2.0 standards," explains Pitchford. "I encourage anyone who can to put the Xbox version next to the PC version to compare them." Well, I did, and it doesn't even compete in the same league.

While the Xbox controller did a fine job with Halo (and I'm not cutting down on it whatsoever) playing Halo: Combat Evolved with a mouse and keyboard is 10 times more satisfying. Not only are your moves more precise, you can react quicker to things coming at you from different sides. Trust me—it makes all the difference in the world.

"Moving to the PC definitely has its advantages."



Mulitplayer Madness

The biggest draw to Halo: Combat Evolved is, without a doubt, the multiplayer component. In addition to new weapons, players will be able to play six new multiplayer levels. "We've spent most of our effort in the multiplayer game," continues Pitchford. New weapons include a plasma mortar (Fuel Rod Gun) and a flamethrower. New vehicles include the Banshee (alien fighter craft) and the Shade turret as well as a new Warthog variant that is mounted with a three-barreled rocket launcher. These things, supplemented with new game mode features, Scorpion tanks, Ghost hovercrafts and other classic Halo multiplayer weapons, provide for a new combined arms battlefield in the Halo universe. The six new multiplayer maps are:

TIMBERLAND: A forest battleground—great for tank battles and base-to-base assaults. Blood Gulch fans rejoice!

INFINITY: The largest map in Halo—a figure eight where Race mode and team-based gameplay are king.

DEATH ISLAND: A multiplayer adaptation of the campaign mission "The Silent Cartographer."

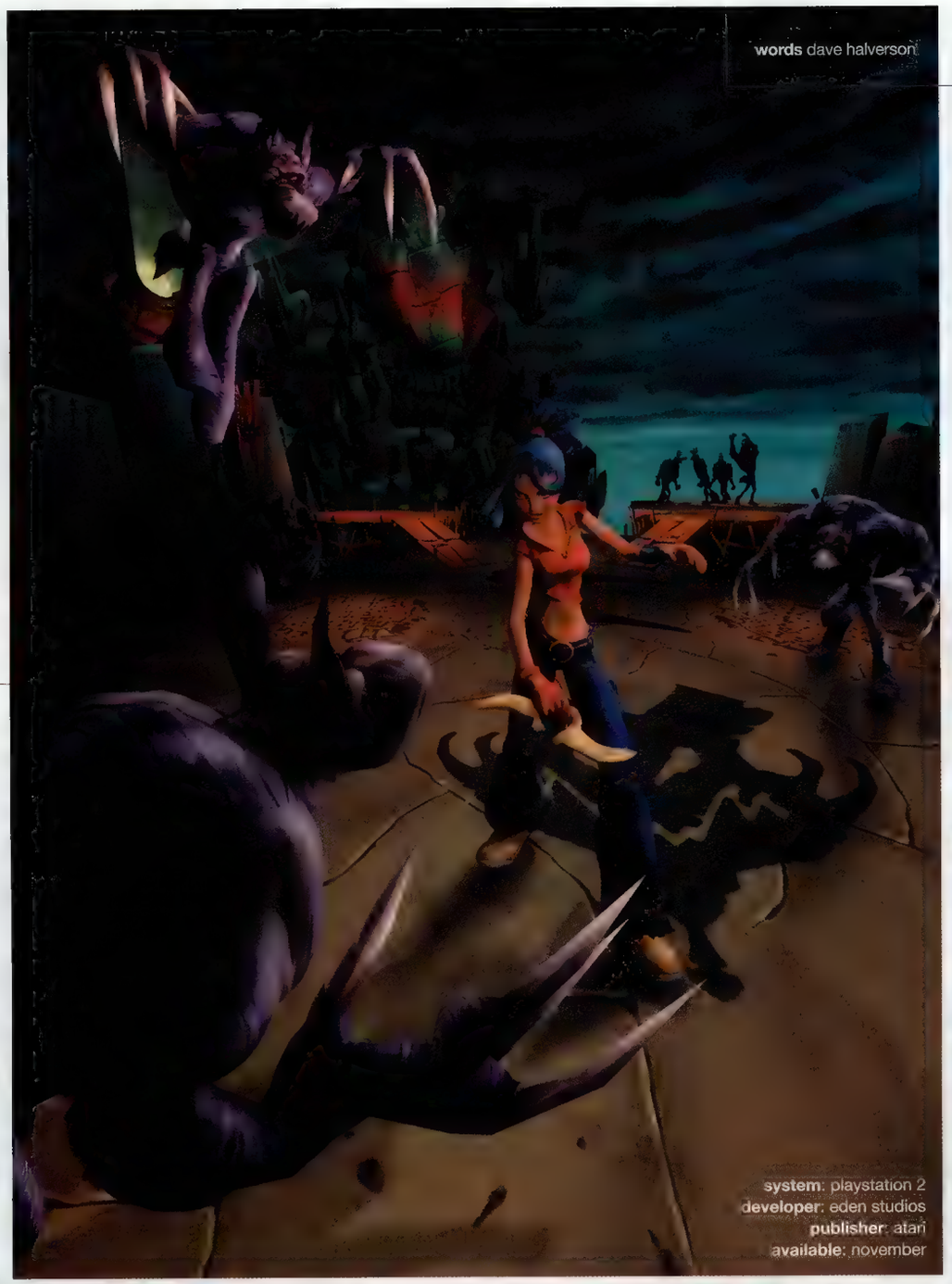
GEPHYROPHOBIA: Means "fear of bridges." Banshee dogfighters and snipers thrive.

DANGER CANYON: Sidewinder-style gameplay in a Blood Gulch-like setting. The Ghost hovercraft rules.

ICE FIELDS: Vehicles lose traction on the slippery surfaces, but speed is everything.

Kya Dark Lineage

Eden Studios gets into the action game with all the fervor that's made them one of racing's best



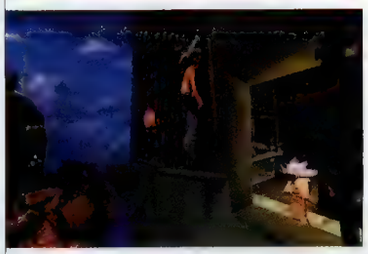
words dave halverson

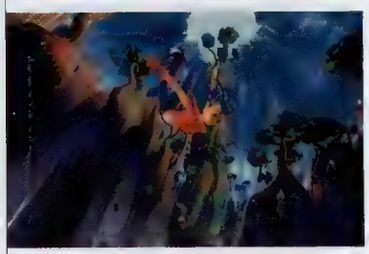
Before actual hands-on previews commence (our builds don't yet warrant scrutiny), we thought we'd give you a taste of where one of the UK's premier racing studios stands on its first adventure game, Kya: Dark Lineage. Ripe with proprietary technology, what seems to really make Kya tick is a sense of freedom and "being there" that few games can muster. Can these road warriors break into the elite realm occupied by Rare, Naughty Dog, Insomniac, Sucker Punch, Ubi Soft, Sega and Nintendo? Here's what game director David Nadal and producer Nour Polloni had to say about their new teen supreme...

system: playstation 2
developer: eden studios
publisher: atari
available: november

Eden's proprietary engine in action; a new action heroine is born

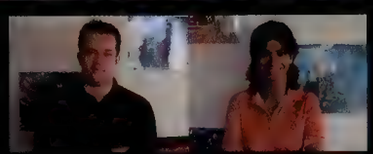






interview

Game Director David Nadal
Producer Nour Polloni



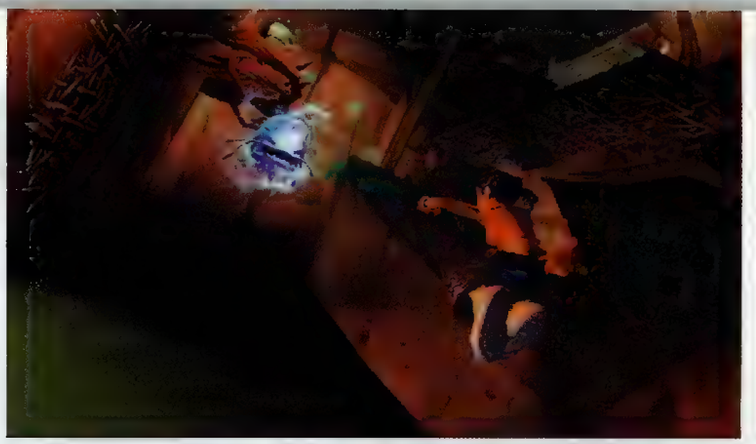
play: Eden is known for making great racing games. What drove you to the platforming genre?
DAVID: It was at the end of V-Rally 2 that we wanted to create an adventure/action game. After having explored the car racing genre, we had the desire to tell a story in our game. We were fans of Mario and Zelda and we wanted to create a game that unites the best of these two genres. We wanted a game in which the player experiences innovative gameplay and explores a fantastic world. We wanted to make a player's dream game.

Indeed, it's become apparent that these games are more anticipated by gamers who grew up on Miyamoto and Yuji Naka than by pre-teens. Are you molding Kya with more seasoned gamers in mind?
DAVID: Yes, we hope that gamers who love Miyamoto and Yuji Naka games will be able to find in Kya the gameplay depth and variety they found in Zelda or Mario.

Do you employ a central hub or village, or is the game one long chain of events?
NOUR: Yes, the Nativ village is the central hub of the game, linking all the regions through a system of air streams and

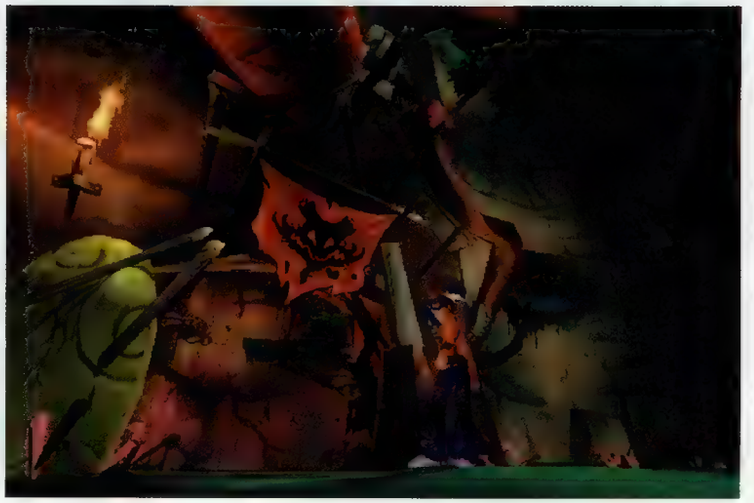
"All the gameplay elements are like tools to the player. The player will choose the type of action he or she would prefer."

The many faces of Kya:
she can ride, she can fight, she can glide









elevators. Kya must come back regularly to buy power-ups and new abilities. The more Nativs Kya frees, the more the village grows. Throughout the game, more shops and challenges will appear with the prosperity of the village.

Tell us about your engine. Did you build it from the ground up?
DAVID: We have created everything in-house, from the game engine to the tools (animations, level coding) we use to develop the game. We don't use the standard industry tools such as Maya since we really wanted to create game-development-dedicated tools adapted specifically to our needs for the games we create, and which we can easily upgrade following emerging needs of the users, to maximize efficiency in game production.

You'll be looking for 60 fps, of course. How many enemies can you squeeze in a frame for Kya to take down?
NOUR: Up to 10 big enemies (Wolfens) and up to 100 small enemies (spiders).

And would you say the game is more adventure or platforming?
NOUR: I would say more action-oriented. We have different types of gameplay integrated in the game such as exploration, combat, infiltration, sliding, riding wild animals, wind dynamic features, weapons, character evolution… Platforming only represents 10-15% of the game.

So it's a well-balanced affair. How much integrated story is there?
DAVID: Today, the game is story-driven yet not linear in its structure. Throughout, there are objectives the player must accomplish in the game, either through the main or side quests. The success of these will unveil the scenario. The discovery of new elements in the story will then create new objectives to accomplish.

Will this unfurl in real time or cinema?
NOUR: The cinematics are mainly real time. We have, however, developed the introduction of the game in CGI.

What type of research did you do before sculpting your character?
DAVID: We were inspired by the character in "Little Red Riding Hood" for the initial colors of the clothing and a modern teenager look for the outfits. The accessories Kya wears, such as the combat bracelet, were inspired from our current family and friends' surroundings.

How many polys is Kya? How about ancillary models: how detailed are they?
DAVID: The Kya in-game model is around 5000 polys. The Wolfens are around 2000 and the small enemies are around 500. The bosses in the game, however, can go up to 5000 polys.

Your lead platform?
NOUR: Playstation 2

Does the game run more optimally on Xbox? Any additions or upgrades for the Xbox game?
DAVID: We have not developed the game on Xbox yet, but with our technology, we will be able to have better visual FX, lights, rendering (bump) work on the distance view. We might even add some extra exclusive mini-games.

What are you aiming for in terms of feel? Dark fantasy? Surrealism? Any real peril in here?
DAVID: We wanted to create from scratch a whole new, original, coherent universe and it's for this reason that we have invested a lot in the graphical research. In this game, we didn't apply the basics of what you find usually (one level of lava, one level of snow, one level with industrial elements…) Each world explored by the player will have its own richness and unique specificity. We think the general feel created would be more "fantasy-like," which is coherent with the story and characters developed.

The story appears standard with Kya losing her brother in a parallel universe. Can you make this engaging to fantasy/adventure fans?
NOUR: Platform games offer stories like "save the princess"-type. In our storyline, the fact that Kya is looking for her brother and trying to find a way back home might seem simple at first, but we have developed plot twists in our scenario to add more depth in the story and make it more interesting.

Sounds intriguing. In a final thought, what would you say sets Kya apart from the pack?
DAVID: We wanted to create a unique gameplay experience. The richness of actions the player can accomplish in the game and the way the gameplays are mixed together (not tied up one after another, but combined in such a way to give depth and originality) are its strong points.
NOUR: Each situation has several approaches to it. All the gameplay elements are like tools to the player. The player will choose the type of action he or she would prefer depending on the type of situations being faced. Most of these situations allow this liberty. We wanted to give players the sensation that they are the creator of their adventure…
We also feel that the coherency and aesthetic universe really plunges the player in the game and reinforces the adventure experience.

incog

From Singletrac to Incog, Jet Moto to Downhill Domination, something tells us these folks are just getting started

words dave halverson



Over the years, Incog Inc. Entertainment (formerly known as Singletrac), working together with SCEA Santa Monica, has provided us with some of the most memorable experiences *moving forward at increased speed* on record. They invented the art of Jet Moto, let us go hog wild in Twisted Metal and created the first free-roaming flying adventure with the unforgettable Warhawk, one of the most celebrated early PS titles. Most recently they've completed work on yet another ground-breaking racer—Downhill Domination—in which they have constructed some of the most amazing racing environments ever seen in a video game, along with a hardware-defying attention to detail. Here's how president Scott Campbell sizes up their accomplishments, past and present:

play: You guys have been making games for a long time. How much has your company changed internally from the early days of the PS to the present day?
Scott Campbell: The biggest change from our early PS one days is that it requires more developers for PlayStation 2 products; however, we still run very lean at just over 50 employees for three teams. For PlayStation 2, you have a greater artist-to-programmer ratio.

How about your philosophy; has it changed over time as well?
Our company philosophy has always been to create and develop games that we ourselves are totally passionate about and want to play AND would shell out the 40 bucks for. Our development philosophy is to let the gameplay dictate and drive our game engine technology instead of the reverse.

Of your early successes—although Jet Moto and Twisted Metal spring first to mind—the game that we unanimously deemed "breakthrough" was Warhawk, because for the first time, instead of only dreaming of "going in there," you actually could...go in there. That and, of course, it was just an amazing mission-based flying/shooting game for its time. As such, why does it remain one of the few games you haven't considered for a sequel?
We actually have considered the Warhawk sequel on more than one concept brainstorm session between Sony and us throughout the past years. The conclusion has always been to evolve our game engine further so that we could deliver the epic adventure that this type of game needs to be. Someday, you might see an incredible sequel to Warhawk.

Jet Moto hasn't graced the PS2 either. Like many studios, has the whole "been there, done that" thing taken its toll? Might you return to any of your past brands in the future?
One of the reasons for aligning with Sony when we started Incog was to continue to develop sequels to all those franchises. In addition, it was also part of our business plan as well as Sony's to create new franchises. This plan has given us the best of both worlds, first in restoring the Twisted Metal franchise, plus creating two new franchises with War of the Monsters and our newly released Downhill Domination. Stay tuned for upcoming new releases and, perhaps, sequels to old favorites.

You've never ventured towards a character-based adventure like a Tomb Raider or a platformer ala Crash, etc. Just not your thing?
Actually, I would consider anything in the action genre open game for us. Our current game engine would definitely support a character-based game and we have explored some very interesting character-based concepts—it's more of a timing thing and what we currently have in our product plan. On the platformer front, this would present some new challenges for us—it would be pretty fun, it's also a very competitive space with the bar set pretty high.

Speaking to what we know is your thing... Your latest racer, Downhill Domination, is outstanding. Obviously riding on a new engine. How long did it take to find a way to cram so much detail and expanse into a buttery smooth fps?
This is where I boast about the quality of our software engineers and technical modelers. Throughout the game development, if a new feature or mechanic was designed and implemented that would make the game better, these guys would obsess on the optimization until it ran a solid 60 fps; many features were added up to the very end of development and they kept squeaking out more engine cycles. It also helps that many of our backgrounds were in the military flight sim industry. If you did not run at a constant 60 fps, you would be in breach of contract. The Downhill Domination engine is an evolution of the Incog engine that first started with Twisted Metal Black. It then evolved for the War of the Monsters, which gave us a robust animation path that we could apply and further evolve for Downhill Domination. For DD, we evolved the engine to enable the high-density racecourse environments plus an IK system for the rider, which blends with our animation system. The development time on Downhill Domination was just around 19 months.

Would you say that you have a similar technological edge when it comes to racing as Naughty Dog and Insomniac do for action? Just how ahead of the curve are Sony's first-party studios, comparatively speaking?
Again, I think our strengths in terms of technology and creativity are in the action genre—racing was a fairly natural evolution of our technology and creative desires. Many of us at Incog had wanted to do a racer on PlayStation 2 for some



The ladies and gentlemen of Incog Inc. Entertainment—so busy there are no chairs in the conference room

time—it was cool that Sony gave us the opportunity. The Sony first-party studios are strongly encouraged to stay out in front of the development pack and break new trails as a mission to promote PlayStation 2 in terms of innovative gameplay and technology. Sony is very selective on which studios are first party; we're excited to be part of this team.

I can't imagine there is, but is there anything that you wish was better in DD or is it exactly as you set out to make it?
We always look back at the product and wish we had more time, memory, cycles, etc. to do it even better, but overall, we are pretty pleased with the result; believe it or not, this is the biggest game, content-wise, that we've done to date. I would have liked to put in a trials/stunt mode—but hey, that's what sequels are for.

What single aspect of the game are you most proud of?
We are pretty excited with all components of the game, but for me, the controls and race courses with all the interactivity are stand-outs.

May I ask why you include the element of attacking in the game? Not that I have a problem with it, but it's such an amazing racer in its own right...
Many of us at Incog are big into the combat element whether it involves cars, monsters or bikes—kind of an occupational hazard. We did not want combat to be the primary focal point of the game but rather a fun mechanic to complement the race for those that enjoy the combat like we do; it is not necessary to combat to win races. A lot of us were also big fans of the early Road Rash games.

Given the "mainstream" cloud we are currently under, in your opinion, is the industry responding correctly to the glut of new users, or do you feel that there's too much pandering to the shock mentality of media in general?
Our industry has become very saturated with game products in all genres much earlier in this hardware lifecycle. Naturally, you will see some new games try and push the shock value to get noticed amidst all the other products. If these products generate controversy (good or bad), it will get attention in the mainstream market place. Our philosophy is to push the edge envelope when it warrants and can contribute to the immersion factor and/or enhances gameplay. We try and stay away from the risky themes that are only for the sake of shock value.

How much do you guys look around at what the rest of the industry is doing before you begin to develop a new product?
As part of the brainstorming process to choose our next game, we always check out other products for potential competition with our game—it's also good to see where the other games are going in terms of technical breakthroughs and new genres of gameplay.

Does Sony have a hand in what you create or is the decision 100 percent your own?
The decision on what games we develop is a collaborative process between Incog and Sony. Both parties need to be excited about the games before it gets greenlit for production.

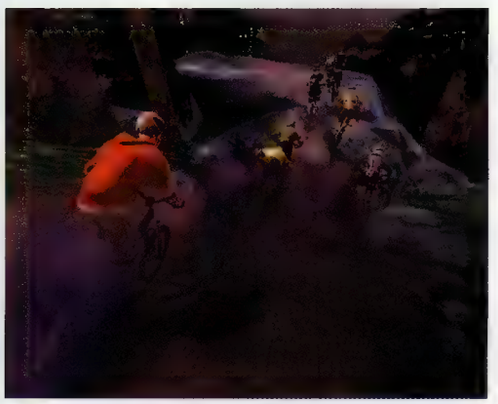
As great as the PS2 is and will likely be until it's retired, it is now considered the least powerful machine of the three modern consoles. Where do you see the next level of gaming taking us?
Much of the initial hype prior to the release of PlayStation 2 and the other new consoles, such as more immersive gameplay, cinematic quality graphics, update rates at 60 fps, etc., etc. still applies to the next-generation consoles (the industry hit a large degree of the above but still fell short of the big hype). Developers will get even closer to delivering the above hype on the next-gen consoles and you will probably see a big quality jump consistent with the last round of hardware. One thing that is certain on these new consoles is that there will be no excuses for games not delivering killer graphics and running at 60 fps. It will (as always) boil down to delivering on the gameplay.

How will racing in particular benefit from the next level of technology?
For a game like Downhill Domination, you could further expand on the rider and bike physics such that you could influence the bike more by controlling the rider weight and position—with even more realistic bike physics, the bike would further modify the rider physics and you would have a new mechanic of counter weighting and steering. The terrain could depict even more surface material accuracy with tire frictions/drag and greater fidelity in the terrain topography. The rider could have an even broader and smoother range of motion. And, of course, better graphics, animations/IK, sound, immersion, etc., etc., etc.

What about PSP and Eye Toy? Might we see Incog test either waters? (And please don't make us pedal in the air.)
Being that we are a Sony first-party developer with a mission to exploit Sony game products, you can count on it.

Are you at liberty to let us in on what's up next for Incog, or at least a hint?
I wish I could, but unfortunately I can't; however, you can bet it will have combat, fast-paced action and tons of stuff to destroy.



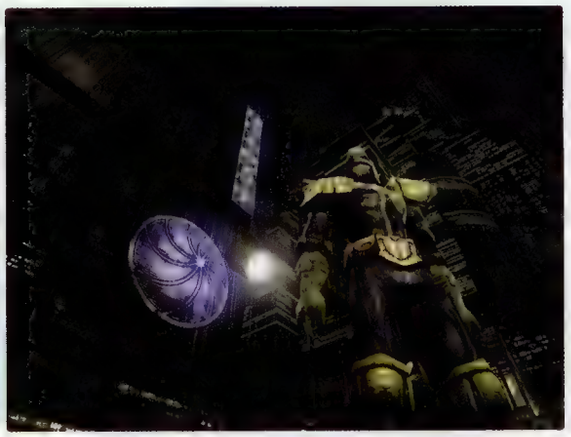


Judge Dredd

system: pc / **developer**: rebellion / **publisher**: vu games / **available**: tba

Oxford-based super-developer Rebellion is set to release the UK's much-anticipated Judge Dredd vs. Judge Death game, an FPS seen through the eyes of Dredd as he patrols the mean streets of the stunningly realized future metropolis, Mega-City One. Dredd will find himself having to deal with the full spectrum of criminal behavior, from littering and caffeine abuse to saving the city from the utterly evil Judge Death. The game will also have extensive multiplayer modes, enabling ferocious split screen or online play and will use Rebellion's versatile new Asura engine. No word yet on a U.S. date, but do expect one. *-DH*







Giftpia

system: gamecube / **developer**: skip / **publisher**: nintendo / **available**: tba

Just how weird is Giftpia? Well, just as an example, it's possible to get intoxicated by eating magic mushrooms, which then causes your hero, Pockle, to get thrown in jail because it's illegal—and on top of that, his face gets blurred out since he's a minor. Aside from that, this RPG has no battles, but instead revolves around doing odd jobs, playing minigames, keeping Pockle from starving to death and warding off ghosts that put Pockle to sleep. It's so weird, in fact, that a U.S. release isn't even guaranteed. *-CH*



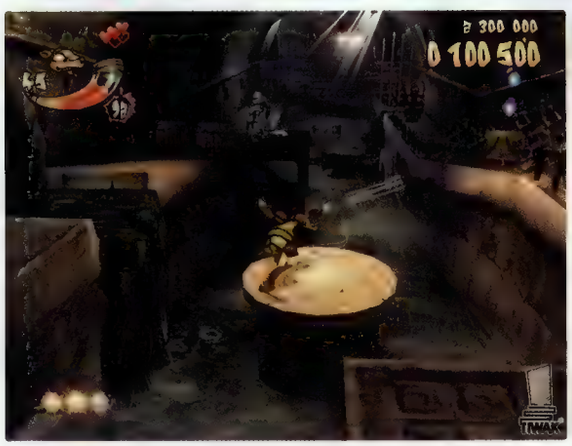
Spawn

system: ps2, gc, xbox / **developer**: namco / **publisher**: namco / **available**: november

With any luck, Spawn's latest date with 3D destiny will be as good as his last—the unforgettable Spawn: In The Demon's Hand (and nothing like his PS1 excursion). This action-adventure game, in the capable hands of Namco, finds Spawn (or as Clown likes to call him, "Spawny") caught between factions in the battle of Good vs. Evil, struggling to break free of the controlling forces of Heaven and Hell. The game will feature all of Spawn's distinctive abilities including superhuman strength, deep hand-to-hand combat, a hellish arsenal of weaponry and of course, his living symbiotic suit. *-DH*





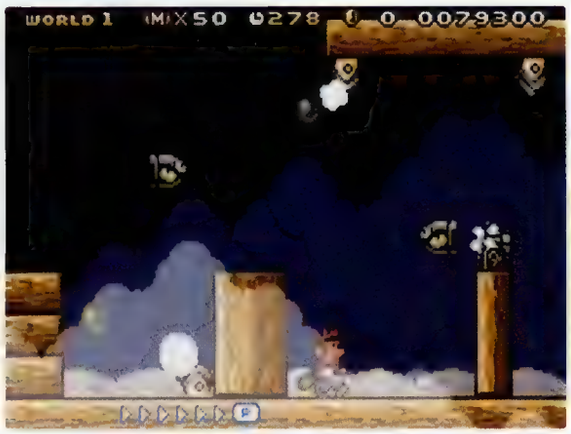


Tork

system: xbox / **developer**: tiwak / **publisher**: tba / **available**: q1 '04

Look! It's Tork! Looking insanely beautiful as always. Our friends at Tiwak tell us that all is well, and to expect the game Q1 next year. Picked as my 2002 E3 game of the show, Tork was recently dropped by Microsoft—no doubt due to the acquisition of Rare—but things are now back on track. No word yet on who the new publisher is, but they're a lucky one. This platformer ranks in the utmost highest echelons of the genre. It's richly textured, controls like a dream, has sick level design, and uniqueness to burn...like this cool armadillo form. Enjoy these never-before-seen screens and stay tuned for more in the months ahead.







Super Mario Advance 4

system: game boy advance / **developer**: nintendo / **publisher**: nintendo / **available**: october

Speaking for myself, I very distinctly remember rushing to the store the day that Super Mario Bros. 3 came out, playing until the wee hours of the night, and then continuing to play it in my head even after setting the controller down. Now we'll finally be able to play this most revered platformer on the GBA, reliving wonderful moments like navigating airships, stomping Hammer Bros., transforming into animal forms and crushing enemies with Kuribo's Shoe. The game looks great and you can even open up new levels and features with e-Reader cards. *-CH*

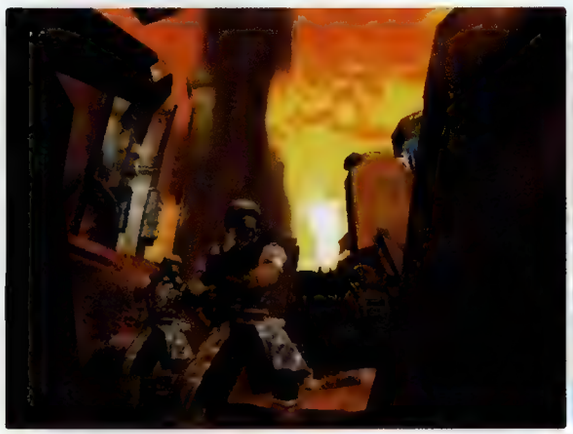


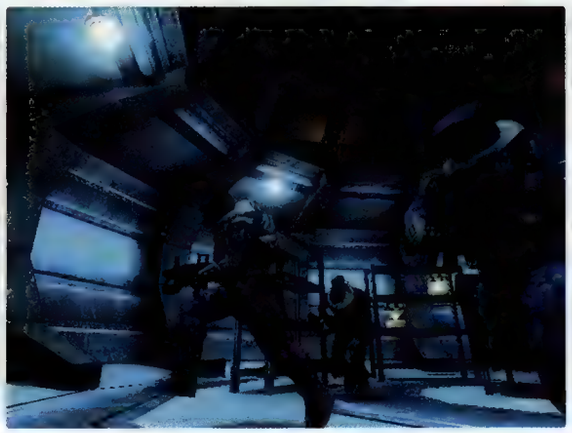
Tenchu: Return from Darkness

system: xbox / **developer**: k2 / **publisher**: activision / **available**: spring 2004

On the heels of K2's excellent Tenchu, Wrath of Heaven for the PS2, Activision has announced Return from Darkness, an enhanced version for Xbox which boasts updated design and technical enhancements, to include 11 stages of gameplay in the story mode with two new single-player maps, as well as six multiplayer levels. Additionally, the game will feature all-new cut-scenes, enemy layouts and a new training mode. Xbox Live will allow for two-player co-op missions through six multiplayer levels along with chat functionality and simultaneous stealth kills. With any luck the enhancements will also include throwing a few more polys Ayame's way. *-DH*







Warhammer

system: xbox / **developer**: kuju entertainment / **publisher**: thq / **available**: nov

Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior is still really rough around the edges, offering a short one-level demo, but what I've seen so far gets me pumped for yet another strong FPS. An interesting choice but certainly welcome, the game is inspired by the popular pen and paper RPG Warhammer. From this universe comes the lead character Case, a Tau warrior armed to the teeth with all the firepower you expect in an FPS. A lot of talk has been made about the deathmatch component of the game, which shows huge potential. *-BF*



Robin Hood: Defender of the Crown

system: playstation 2 / **developer**: cinemaware / **publisher**: capcom / **available**: september

Fighting against the Sheriff of Nottingham in only the beginning as Robin Hood finds himself battling for the honor and unity of all of England in this revival of the PC classic Defender of the Crown. Combining strategy reminiscent of games like Risk with action minigame sequences for archery, swordplay, jousting, laying siege to castles and army-to-army battles, DOTC is a unique experience that taxes both your reflexes and resource management skills. Famous characters like Little John, Friar Tuck and Maid Marian even lend a hand in the war to dethrone Prince John. *-CH*



Project Gotham Racing 2

system: xbox / **developer:** bizarre creations / **publisher:** microsoft / **available:** october

How much better can they make it, you ask? Let me count the ways: new Kudos Ranking system including drafting, Xbox Live components like leader boards, the ability to join speed demons the world over and challenge their ghosts, Multiplayer System Link head-to-head, more cities, including Barcelona, Edinburgh, Florence, Chicago, Moscow and many more, and more cars, including the Enzo Ferrari and the Pontiac GTO, along with other classics. You can even trip around the showrooms outside the car. It also somehow looks better (the car models defy description) and the handling, in my opinion, is much improved. *-DH*



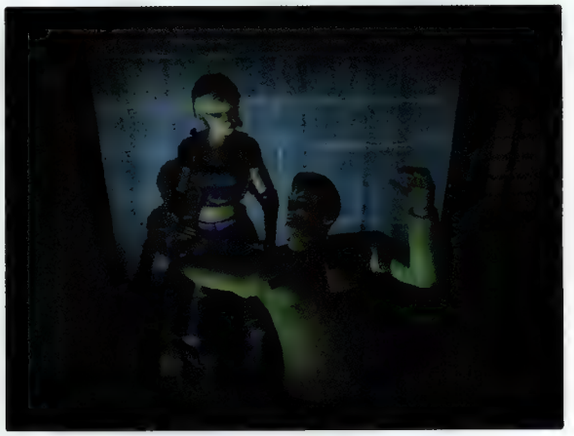




Rogue Ops

system: ps2, xbox / **developer:** bits studios / **publisher:** kemco / **available:** oct xbox nov ps2

Say hello to Nikki Connors, who no longer looks so much like Lara Croft, having been recently overhauled to sport the new blonde 'do. Nikki gets down with her bad blonde self as an ex-Green Beret on a quest for vengeance after her husband and child are killed in a terrorist explosion. After receiving two years of training, she is unleashed as an operative for Omega 19, a terrorist organization recognized as the most ominous in the world. Part Alias, part Schwarzenegger flick, it's all uphill from there. The game needs a spot of polish, but it's looking quite good otherwise. *–DH*



King of Fighters 2000 and 2001

system: ps2 / **developer:** snk playmore/eolith cd., ltd. / **publisher:** snk neo geo usa / **avail:** october

Bundled together in one package, The King of Fighters 2000 and The King of Fighters 2001 offer the classic, 2D, hand-drawn, team-on-team battles that have made the franchise a hit for so many years. New characters enter the fray, boosting the rosters up to 34 characters in KOF 2000 and 40 in KOF 2001, and new PS2-exclusive Strikers have been added. Other enhancements include hi-res visuals and new graphic effects, as well as a bonus mode to view highlights of past KOF games. *-CH*







Metal Slug Advance

system: gba / **developer:** snk playmore / **publisher:** snk neo geo usa / **available:** november

What's this? An all new original Metal Slug for the Game Boy Advance? Indeed it is. One of the most detailed and addicting side scrollers ever created, it may melt your GBA, but it'll be worth it. Metal Slug has now gone from being 100% off the US radar to the brink of re-introducing hand drawn 2D to a 3D world. With Metal Slug 3 and 4 coming to the PS2 (with a little luck) the only mission left for SNK Playmore is to port Magician Lord and Nam '75. We will then build a monument in their honor. Metal Slug Advance is due out this November. *-DH*







Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly

system: ps2 / **developer:** tecmo / **publisher:** tecmo / **available:** tba

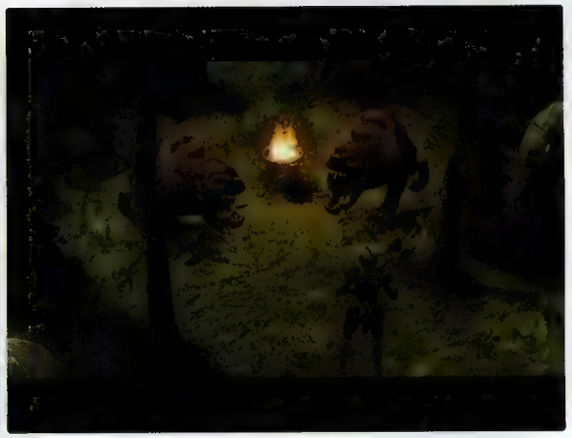
Fatal Frame was a quiet hit on PS2 and Xbox, at least for the fans who experienced its wicked haunted-house chills. This sequel puts twins Mio and Mayu into the new nightmare, with the game mechanic continuing to revolve around the spiritual essence of a camera ghost-capturing system. The imagery in the game looks even more haunting than before, relying on the unseen as much as the in-your-face gore. *-BF*



Champions of Norrath

system: playstation 2 / **developer:** snowblind / **publisher:** soe / **available:** november

Published by the creators of EverQuest and developed by the team behind Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance (Snowblind), Champions of Norrath is being touted as the "next-generation of action RPGs." The game is said to have 100 hours of gameplay...per player character...so there's your EverQuest tie-in right there. As one of five races, you'll adventure through random dungeons for a different and unique gameplay experience, each and every time with up to four players over the Internet or on a single PS2 with multi-tap. You can also import player characters into friends' games and then take them home to play solo. *-DH*







Culdcept

system: playstation 2 / **developer:** omiya soft / **publisher:** nec interchannel / **available:** fall

NEC explained Culdcept as a mix between Monopoly and a card-battle game, and the description couldn't be more apt. This deeply strategic game—which has already proven popular enough to go through several iterations in Japan—takes place in a board game-like environment, with players moving along paths and occupying elemental squares with the monsters from their card deck. Land on your opponent's squares and it's either win the fight or pay up. There are a vast number of cards to battle with, all beautifully illustrated by famous Japanese artists. *-CH*



Shantae Advance

system: gba / **developer:** wayforward technologies / **publisher:** vu games / **available:** winter

Although I'm sure few have heard of Shantae, it stands as one of the Game Boy Color's best, created by WayForward Technologies, the people responsible for the Castlevania-tised Scorpion King for GBA and soon Spy Vs. Spy (!) for console. The seriously addictive side scroller, starring the coolest game genie of them all, is now being fitted for the Game Boy Advance; just give it a rub and out she'll pop. We'll have all the scoops as soon as we can get her out of the bottle. *-DH*



system: gamecube
developer: production studio 4
publisher: capcom
available: october

Viewtiful Joe
Character Bios

The best thing to happen to 2D since the NES, Viewtiful Joe is coming this October. We received a Viewtiful review copy just before we put this issue to print, so believe it when we say it's one of the very best games of the year. While we prepare to blow it out next month, we figure that since you're about to invite these people into your home, you should probably get to know them...

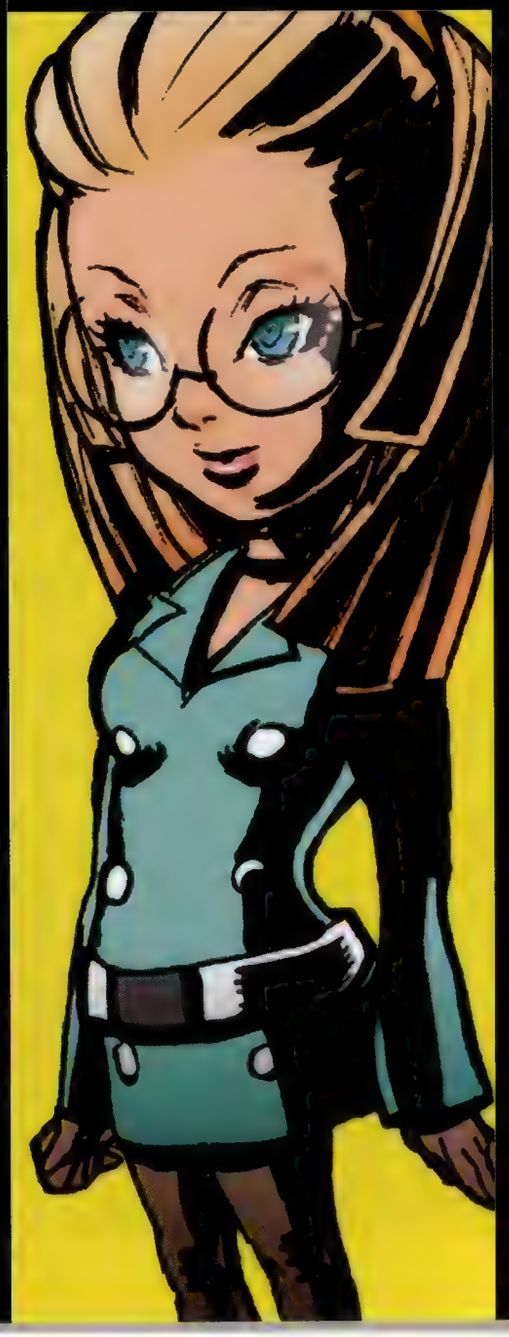
Joe

Joe is an ordinary dude with ordinary dreams who loves going to the movies, especially to see his favorite super hero, Captain Blue. He's also about to witness the world's most realistic special effects. While trying to divide his time between Blue's onscreen exploits and Sylvia's advances (obviously a man with warped sensibilities), Captain Blue is defeated, and Sylvia is snatched by the perpetrator! Before he takes off, however, the wretch clocks Blue's giant robot Six Majin, sending it crashing into the theatre! Better hitch a ride, Joe! Transported into the celluloid world, Joe is presented the VFX Powers to slow down, speed up, or zoom in on his foes to fight with viewtiful style and vanquish evil! Your hero-ness has awakened Joe! Henshin-a-go-go-baby!



Sylvia

To Sylvia, an empty matinee is a golden opportunity for some two-player action; to Joe, it's the sacred house of Blue. On the movie date in question Joe is zoned in a Captain Blue classic, but that doesn't stop Sylvia from jumping his bones. While she's got him pinned, Captain Blue is somehow vanquished...but Joe misses it! How could this possibly happen!? Suddenly, Sylvia senses a strange connection with Blue as he plummets into oblivion, but it's too late! The evil black mech that sent him to his doom turns to Joe next and declares Sylvia the object of his revenge. Joe thinks it's the coolest 3D ever, until a giant arm reaches in to the front row and snatches her away. Bye-bye Sylvia!



Captain Blue

Back in the day, Captain Blue was a huge action movie star; he's also Joe's all-time favorite super hero. Once defeated by his onscreen nemesis, the conquered Captain Blue turns to Joe as his successor after Joe is pulled into the celluloid realm to save his girlfriend Sylvia from the clutches of a giant evil mech. There, Captain Blue bestows upon Joe the powerful V-Watch and schools him in the art of VFX Power which he must use to fight evil with viewtiful style. Take up the torch of justice, young movie lover! But please, no autographs...



system: xbox
developer: from software
publisher: sega
available: now

Otogi
Myth of Demons
A purely Japanese experience down to the tiniest details

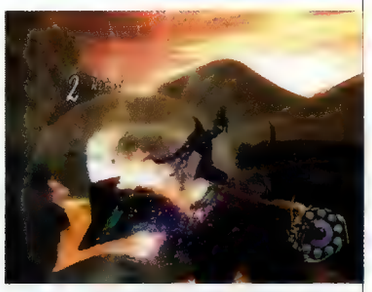
words brady fiechter

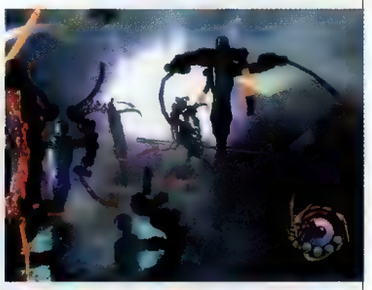
Strip away the power of visual communication and the storytelling in video games is rarely more than comfortable fluff. What tends to separate Japanese games from American games is the innocence of simplicity that often drives the more commanding accomplishments. Sweeping spiritual themes often build the world we escape to, drawing from honor and passion and the pursuit for the fundamental truths of life and death. There's often a packaging of the cute and fantastical, but this doesn't dilute the underlying strength of the inspiration behind the art.

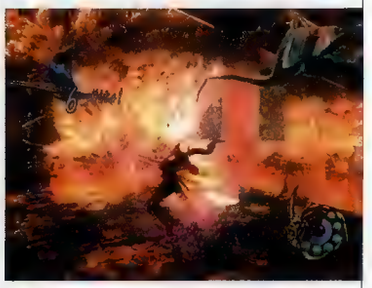
Otogi, one of the more elegant, gorgeously conceived action games of the year, rides high on its themes of ancient demons and spirits, of soul cleansing and the wicked being born again. There really isn't much dialogue at all, but the way the game sprinkles its mysticism around the ceaseless combat through both words and visual strokes is subtly transfixing. Where most games today are leaning toward deeper adventure and drawn-out presentation, Otogi relies on a more traditional approach of smaller, compartmentalized levels filled with specific tasks like destroying bosses, wiping out legions of enemies, knocking out fortressed structures. The action can very easily get tiring in this type of game, but the smart level design and widely varied objectives keep us fully immersed in Otogi's universe; it never feels like we're just going through the motions, one kill after another. A basic reward system grants monetary rewards for purchasing weapons, magic and pendants, enticing us to clean out every last corner—almost everything can be hacked to bits.

One of the more striking moments in the game involves a moonlit pass over deadly waters, and it's here that we begin to feel the challenge ramp up and enjoy how meticulous the gameplay mechanic really is. Randomly smashing buttons, jumping into a boss situation without studying the surroundings, is suicide. Those lovely paintings that detail every area's collection of demons are more than a picture book; information can be used to pick appropriate weapons and magic for the obstacles that lie ahead. When it's time for the hunt, the command of the ethereal character Raiko is one of those instantly distinct feelings. There is a sense of newness, a sense of actually controlling a mythical being who can float on a trail of magic, slicing away the spirit energy of surrounding foes to fill his perpetually draining life. Raiko can ascend vertiginous heights with the power of his magic-fueld dashing, meeting enemies in the air for an indefinite suspension of combos and leaping across perilous platforms. It takes some time to sink into the flow of Raiko's movement, but the skillful execution that eventually comes is immensely satisfying. Games like this are rare, and only the Japanese imagination seems capable of their creation. **B+**



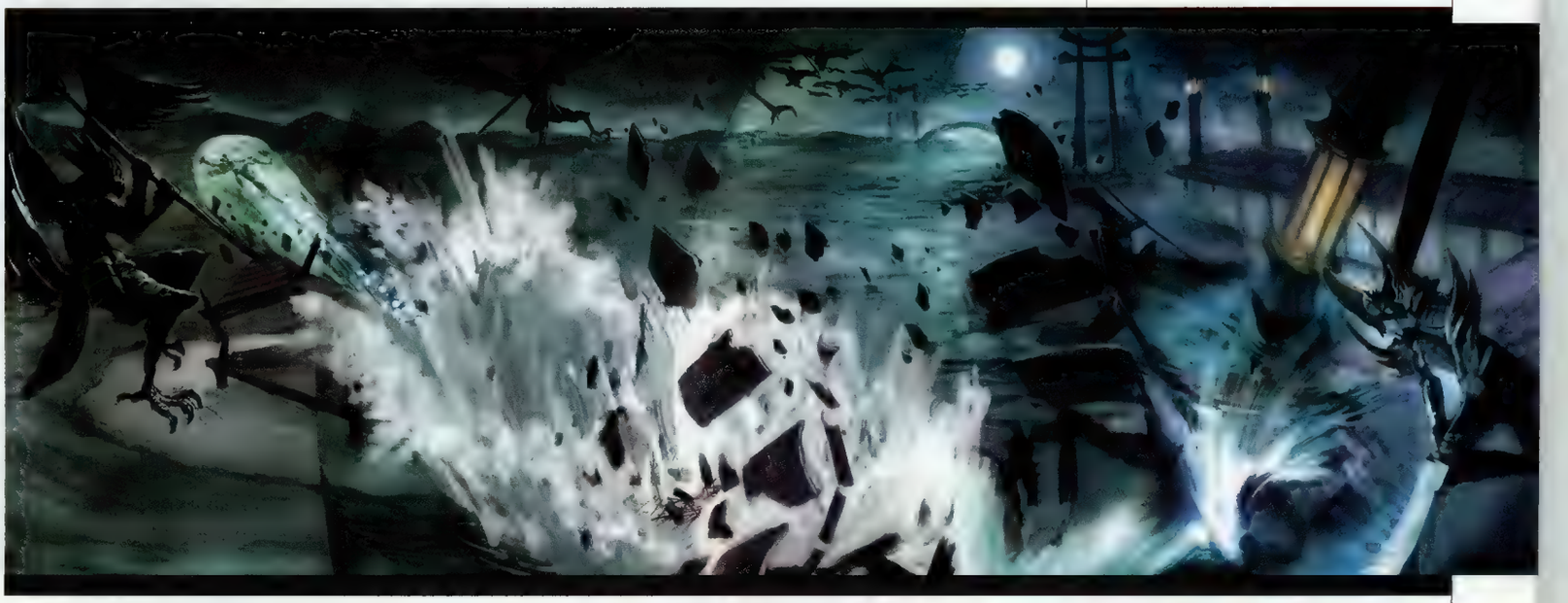






I never got tired of seeing how many cool effects I could conjure and how many things I could destroy in one continual pass

"...it never feels like we're just going through the motions, one kill after another."



Disgaea

Hour of Darkness

Classic strategy behind a charming facade

words chris hoffman

One would think, given the popularity of titles like Final Fantasy Tactics and Vandal-Hearts, that strategy-RPGs of this ilk would be far more common on current-generation systems. With few exceptions, this class of games has gone underrepresented as of late, and while there seems to be no particular reason for this, it does assure one thing: the familiar grid-based mechanics of Disgaea are all the more welcome on PlayStation 2.

Though the core gameplay of Disgaea never wanders far from the template established by the great strategy-RPGs of the past, Disgaea does it with a flair all its own and with enough additions to the formula to make it worth the while of even seasoned vets of this type of game. As a demon-prince attempting to ascend to the throne two years after his father's death, the player is thrust into a dark story told from a hell's-eye view, but at the same time one that is bubbling over with a charming anime graphical style and characters that are cuter than a basket of kittens. The mix is delightfully quirky (though likely too fruity for some), and the eccentricity carries over to the soundtrack, which at times rocks way more than you'd expect.

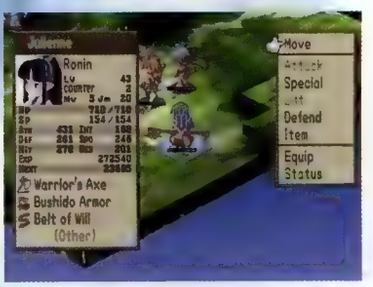
Unique gameplay additions showcase the same type of inspiration. The simple mechanic of being able to throw allies and enemies adds a completely new dimension of strategy to the game, as does the inclusion of Geo Panels, which not only enhance terrain with various effects but also allow for massive combos once you've mastered using them. While leveling up weapons is tedious, the ability to custom-build your own army of characters from the ground up (if you've accrued the points to do so) is an excellent feature.

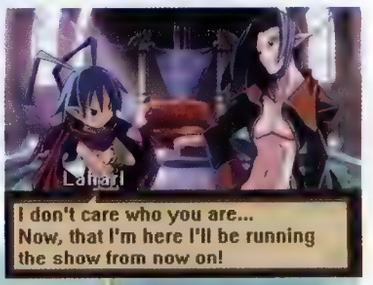
Amidst these new gameplay twists and smart quirkiness, though, Disgaea's greatest strength lies in its foundation of traditional strategy gameplay; little to be called revolutionary, just good, solid fun. It's unlikely that you'll be swept away by the gameplay if other games of the type haven't piqued your interest, but if you're a strategy fan, be prepared to enjoy a fine example of the genre. B

"Disgaea's greatest strength lies in its foundation of traditional strategy gameplay."



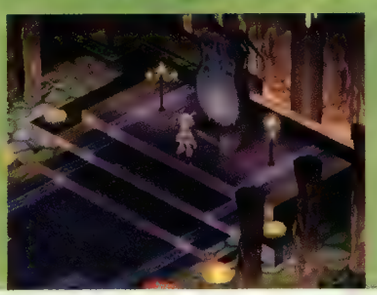














If Disgaea's graphical style looks familiar, it's because it's from the creators of Fhapsody on the PS1

system: playstation 2
developer: nippon ichi software
publisher: atlus
available: august

Futurama

Matt Groening gets into the game game, bringing his future classic to life in the polygonal realm

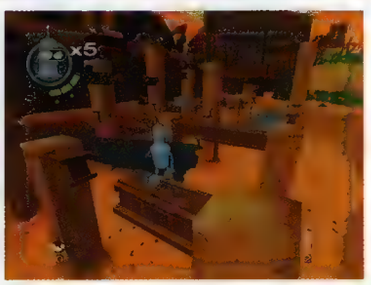
words dave halverson

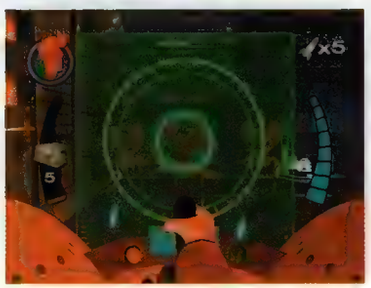
system: playstation 2, xbox, gc
developer: uds
publisher: vu games
available: september













Bender looks for a way out of the goo; too bad it's the other way

"There's really little to complain about, unless you don't dig robots—then you're screwed."

All hail the art of cel shading. What was considered innovative just a few short years ago (the blink of an eye by gaming standards) has become a passport for the cartoon universe—the harbinger of toons everywhere looking to inflate their 2D image into the three-dimensional realm. As time marches on, the art of cel shading continues to liberate the TV rank and file. Beyond the current crop, *South Park, Striperella, Kim Possible, Invader Zim* and *Ren and Stimpy* can't be far behind. In the meantime, *Futurama* fans are about to get their wish. A Groening-designed quality flesh fair is at hand, all you meat bags, starring Fry, Bender, Leela, Professor Farnsworth and more adult satire than you can shake a bag of Glagnar's Human Rinds at.

Things get underway when Farnsworth sells Planet Express to Mom, giving her a 51% share and, subsequently, majority control over Earth, thus enslaving the world, which she also plans on turning into the next Death Star. Deciding the best course of action is to flee, you begin the game with a simple training mission, as Fry gathers tools needed to repair the ship. Things escalate rapidly and from there literally never let up. Fry's action/shooting levels (with mild platforming on the side) take him through complex sewers, old New York, the Red Light District and ultimately New New York—competent, at times sparkling, action sorties laced with irreverent humor and fresh gameplay from end to end. If the rest of the game merely continued down the same path all would be well in terms of doing right by the license, but this code warrior has only begun to fight. Bender is up next, and his clanky jaunt through Weasel Canyon and perilous junkyards are platforming heaven. Leela follows—her one eye fixed on fisticuffs and puzzle solving—and in between, Crash Bandicoot-derivative boulder chases and critter dashes add even more diversity. Excellent progression and flow are at hand; detonations, interactive environments, timing platforms, memory and action puzzles, pattern-based obstacles, killer bosses, gut-busting 3D movies, excellent level design, spot-on visuals, a vivid soundtrack. Groening busts out every trick from every book, sculpting his interactive episode on his journey far beyond the call of duty. This is a license done complete justice. Even though the characters don't possess the nimble design needed to articulate like staple platforming characters (Groening's characters are quite dense), their individual models are compensated for within each segment of the engine, which (on Xbox) throws up massive environments and tosses them around at 60 fps. There's really little to complain about, unless you don't dig robots—then you're screwed. Either someone called a meeting at VU and ordered a tide-turning turn for all of their properties, or they're just on one major roll. Either way, with Simpsons Hit & Run, Buffy: Chaos Bleeds, and now Futurama all in the same quarter, their combination of great game DNA with TV properties is breeding 800 lb. gorillas. Let's all shwing along, shall we? **B**



Buffy The Vampire Slayer
Chaos Bleeds

To Hellmouth with it

words dave halverson

Going into this review I had reservations about this year's version of Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Not only had The Collective set the bar sky high with last year's Buffy the Vampire Slayer, nailing just about every aspect of high adventure from exploration to intriguing puzzles to one of the best fighting engines around—but they did so on Xbox, taking advantage of Big Green's added horsepower for texture variation and depth, realistic models and a host of wicked special effects. They also wisely (or so it would seem) stuck to Buffy as the sole playable character—the single aspect of the new Eurocom title that had me most concerned. I mean...Xander? Do I really want to play as Xander? They did, however, leave a few cracks to be filled, namely the game's balance, which made the later levels nearly impossible to breach if you didn't carry over a stake-bed of health packs, which was no small feat. Even so, the game was so strong, the Buffy faithful pressed ahead...slaying, heckling the undead and jiggling countless door handles.

Having played the final version of Chaos Bleeds, all of my concerns have been laid to rest. Not only does the game look better than its predecessor but it outperforms it in nearly every way: the puzzles are even more intelligent (and nicely integrated I might add), the fighting is on par and benefits from multiple characters, the difficulty scale has been skillfully balanced, and the cast models, although I still have issues with Buffy's face, are at least on par with last year's model. On the demon side, however, Chaos Bleeds buries the competition with a far more diverse quiver of undead foes, and the creature designs are far superior to the original.

The levels start out in familiar territory—spiking vamps and solving fairly rudimentary puzzles—but gradually evolve in size and complexity, culminating in downright awe. Faith's first outing, for instance, begins in an outdoor excavation that brings the franchise to new heights, twisting its way through a mining shaft she must flood to reach a dilapidated mansion above, reeking of wall-to-wall detail and fascinating puzzles—a contrast in terms more often than not. Elsewhere, in a nightmare version of Sunnydale (I don't dare give away the game's plot, but

system: playstation 2, gamecube, xbox
developer: eurocom
publisher: vu games
available: august

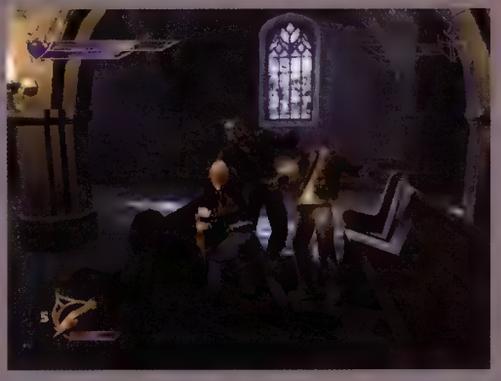
it's a good one), a deserted cineplex is done complete justice down to the movie posters, turnstiles and even the projection booths. The fine detail in the game is vexing given the smooth frame rate and integrity throughout, and all three platforms have it going on. This may be the PS2's single best adventuring engine.

Of the playable characters, Willow, Faith and Spike are exceptional, although Xander's High School hostage rescue is extremely well laid, as is Buffy's escort level guiding an injured Giles to safety. Surprisingly, since each character is adapted to the game with great care in line with their TV personas, the multi-character aspect of the game makes it feel more like you're playing an episode, and since there'll be no more of those, it's a bittersweet exchange. If there is one minor flaw in the game, it's a lack of agility in the cast's animation and stances. There are small bouts of jumping and balancing on small objects that the models can't conform to, so you may find your character floating in a fighting stance on a thin ledge or stairs—a common by-product of current 3D technology. This doesn't affect the game, although it will be nice when all characters are molded to fit their environments like Primal's Jen or the latest incarnation of Miss Croft. If you're wondering about the series tongue-in-cheekiness, fear not, it's in full effect: when Buffy picks up a longer stake in this one, she quips, "Just what a girl needs—a nice long shaft." There's your Teen rating right there, along with the reason so many of us will miss Buffy so very much. **B+**



Willow in action: when magic leaves you wanting, a good stake really hits the spot









"Chaos Bleeds buries the competition with a far more diverse quiver of undead foes, and the creature designs are far superior."

Billy Hatcher and the Giant Egg

Chicken game for the soul

words chris hoffman







Billy Hatcher And The Giant Egg demonstrates exactly the kind of pure, playful, unadulterated fun that got me into video games years ago. It's innovative platforming at the top of its game, sweetly wrapped inside rich, vibrant, surreal artwork and infectious music that will cause you to tackle just one more challenge or uncover one more secret before bedtime.

A simple visceral pleasure exists within Billy Hatcher's silly premise of crushing enemies with giant eggs and subsequently hatching animal-pal power-ups, one in which the Sonic Team and Yuji Naka magic are readily prevalent throughout. With frequently curvy architecture and aerial leanings, level designs ring of the unique qualities of Sonic and NiGHTS, and the characters would be right at home in said Saturn classic. Despite a familiar feel to past efforts, Billy Hatcher is teeming with innovation when it comes to mission goals, stage layouts and play mechanics. Whether riding an egg like a unicycle, launching yourself from cannons, building a head for a snowman, saving allies, collecting coins within a time limit or defeating a set number of enemies, you'll almost always have something new to enjoy. The implementation of the animal helpers is also ingenious, as they are at times crucial for overcoming puzzles or obstacles; too bad they aren't necessary just a bit more often.

The game isn't perfect. You'll encounter occasional camera problems, a bit of pop-up and the rare stuttering frame rate, plus Billy has the tendency to drop his eggs at the most inopportune moments (like at the edges of cliffs), but it's nothing to get your comb in a bunch. The game's also not particularly difficult, though finding coins to let you hatch a certain blue hedgehog should keep seasoned gamers occupied for a while.

I've already heard more than a few people dismiss Billy Hatcher as child's fare, and while the concept is bizarre at best, gamers would do well to look past the syrupy exterior and experience the joy within. In fact, gamers would probably do well to tie down any reluctant friends and force them to experience Billy Hatcher, shell and all. Billy Hatcher is, in my opinion, at least as good as Mario Sunshine, and that's not praise I give lightly. **A-**

system: gamecube
developer: sonic team
publisher: sega
available: september

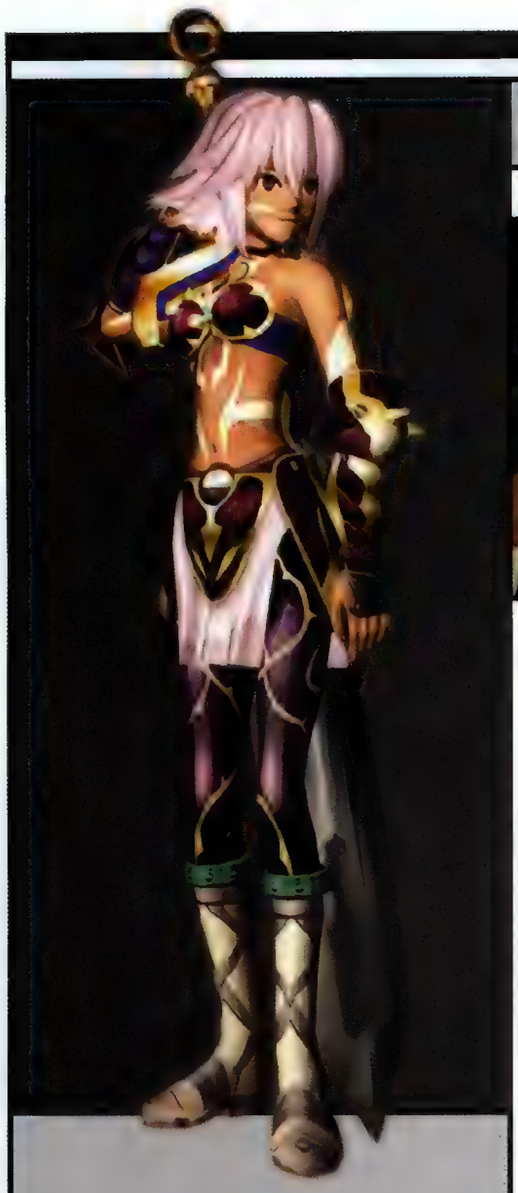
"...the Sonic Team and Yuji Naka magic are readily prevalent throughout"











.hack part 3: Outbreak

Massively Multiplayer Offline RPG

words chris hoffman





"The greatest strength of the .hack series comes from its unusual and strikingly original premise..."

Writing a review for .hack part 3: Outbreak almost seems unnecessary. After all, it's the third chapter in what is the first true episodic game series released in the U.S., and thus is very similar to its predecessors. Outbreak shares the same strengths and weaknesses as the previous games, and if you've played either of them, you've probably already become absorbed into The World or have decided to leave it behind. And if you haven't played .hack before, you would most certainly want to start with the first game, Infection. With that said, however, Outbreak is an intriguing, if somewhat flawed, role-playing experience.

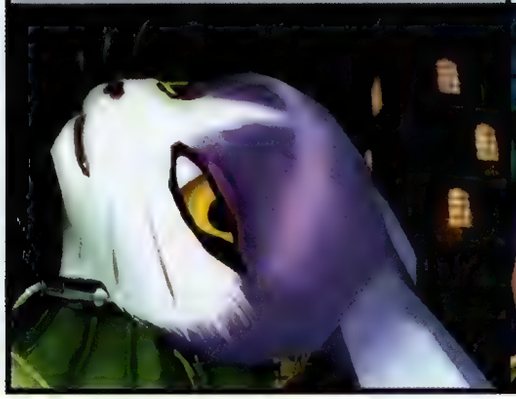
The greatest strength of the .hack series comes from its unusual and strikingly original premise, the intrigue of playing a faux online RPG riddled with mystery and deadly implications. .hack's game-within-a-game, The World, is a believable recreation of a MMORPG, only you don't need to pay fees, coordinate with friends or deal with unintelligible hacker-speak. Picking up directly from the cliffhanger ending of Mutation, Outbreak continues to compel by offering yet more plot twists and dangling tantalizing keys to unlock the secrets of The World and the Epitaph Of Twilight.

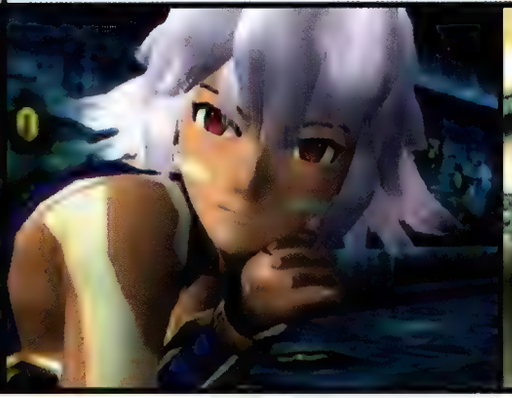
Other facets of Outbreak don't stand up so well to scrutiny. Though visually decent and boasting great character design, the game suffers from substantial draw-in and occasional frame-rate drops. Communicating with and equipping your teammates is both inadequate and cumbersome, melee combat is unspectacular, and oppressively difficult enemies occasionally appear that require substantial level-building. Additionally, dungeons are just plain dull, especially considering how much time you spend in them. Let's face it: The World wouldn't be a very fun game if it weren't for all the coma-inducing virus outbreaks.

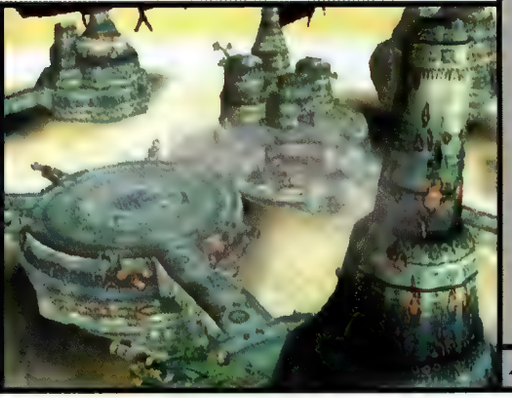
While these flaws are impossible to ignore, and definitely have dragged down the score, it is in spite of them that I crave to see and experience what happens next. The story really is of the utmost quality, and if you've enjoyed the first two installments of .hack, the latest will not disappoint. Now it's just a matter of awaiting the conclusion in Quarantine to determine if it all pays off. **C+**

system: playstation 2
developer: cyber connect 2
publisher: bandai
available: now

In both graphics and gameplay, Outbreak is identical to the previous .hack games







system: gamecube
developer: sega av
publisher: nintendo
available: august

F-Zero GX

Nintendo gives one of their babies to Sega, and it's a speeding bundle of joy

words michael hobbs

I was thrilled at the news that Sega was doing the GameCube F-Zero. Indeed, I was perhaps even more excited than if the game were an internal Nintendo one. Though Nintendo understands many things very well, without question, Sega has more practical knowledge and experience in developing pure racing titles.

This certainly shows in their exhilarating and beautiful F-Zero GX. For as much as the game is about speed and visual impact, it is also about feel and the overlooked art of track design. The game slams you in your seat, but it's also infused with the kind of subtlety and attention to detail that only truly talented developers can muster.

The most obvious appeal of the game is of course its speed, but this is just the beginning of the story. Many games have been fast, but what marks this one out is skillful design. The speed is there not just to thrill but to involve the player in a deeply addictive play style where finesse is the order of the day. You must have the lightest touch to keep the vehicles on the racing line, and this becomes even more fraught as you deal with a track that is falling away and attempting at times to hurl you out of the course. Racing at top



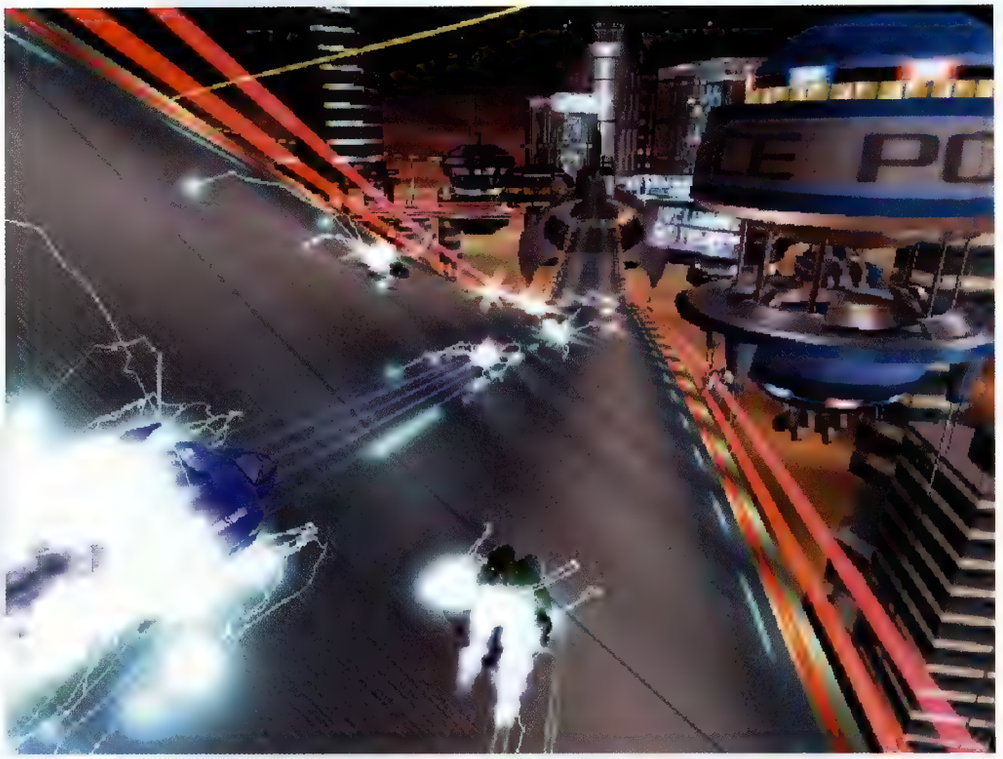
"The most obvious appeal of the game is of course its speed, but this is just the beginning of the story."

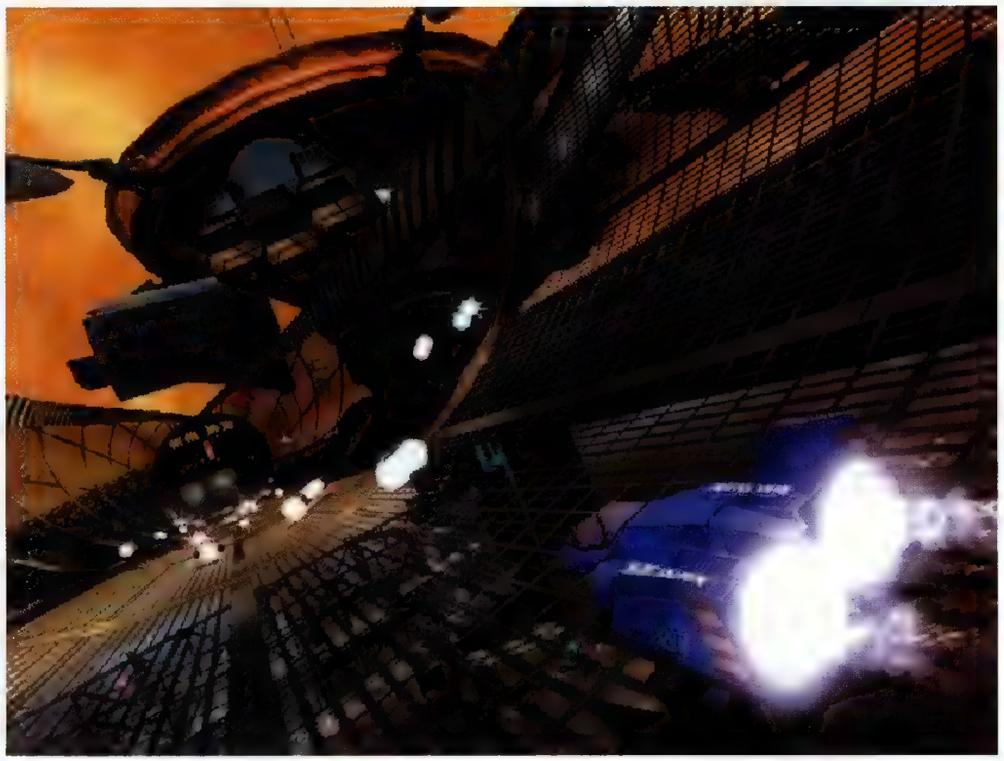
speed takes total concentration and it rewards with total satisfaction.

Surrounding and supporting this terrific action is truly great track design. And by that I do not mean the physical appearance of the courses. I am talking about the layouts of the tracks themselves, and it is here that Sega really show their talents in this black art. It is not easy to design courses that are simply satisfying to race around regardless of the circumstances, but they've done it here. The placement of the speed boosts, repair strips and the combination and radii of corners are all perfectly judged so as to instill deep pleasure when you hit them all just right.

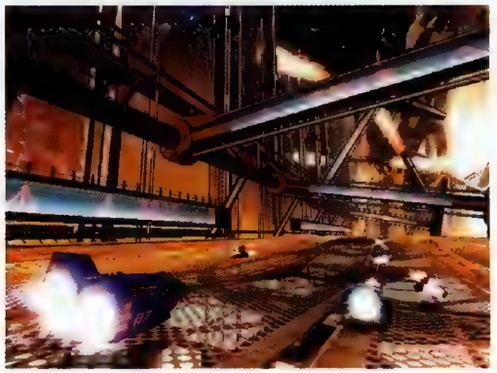
Of course, it helps that the game also looks the business. These sci-fi environments are awe-inspiring in their conception and execution, easily my favorite since the first Wipeout. There is such great eye candy here from the various weather effects to the brilliant use of spidery lattice work along the roller coaster-like courses that instill incredible depth to the high-speed scenery.

What with all my ranting about the basic quality of the game, I've nearly overlooked its very well designed structure, which offers the usual multiplayer and time trial modes, but also adds a great story mode complete with CG sequences and a very extensive customizing option. With this you can make your own ship from scratch using parts purchased by earning points during story mode. You can also unlock many secret ships and pilots through this system, giving the game a great deal of replayability. **A-**









Racing against 29 other racers at 1000 km/h in the future. What's better than this?

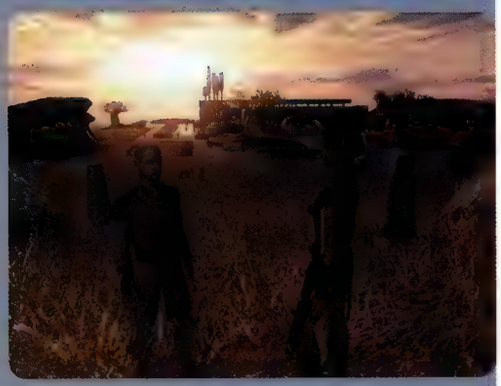
Star Wars
Knights of the Old Republic

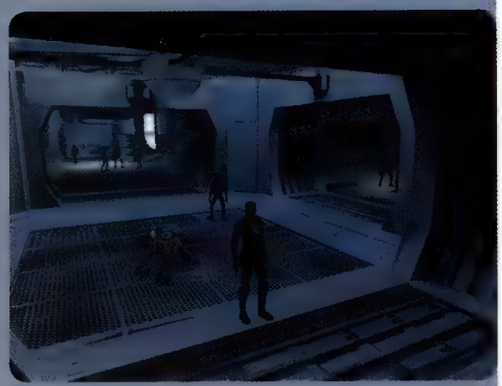
One of the more complex, deeply playable RPGs on console

system: xbox
available: now









The *Star Wars* theme music plays as the prologue to Knights of the Old Republic scales into focus, setting up the ominous events about to unravel. Doesn't matter how many times you've been stamped with the trademark Star Wars opening presentation—chills tickle your spine, your eyes widen, you're set to lose yourself to whatever wonders might await. Flushed from your mind are the memories of slipshod Star Wars games of old, games that effortlessly wasted one of the richest veins of inspiration any developer could possibly dream of. You just know this is gonna be the one that does it right, the one that transports you into a Star Wars universe and makes you forget 30 hours of your now rearranged life.

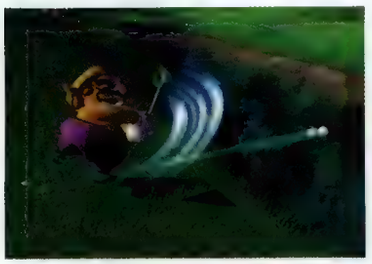
It is with this beguiling spell that Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic delivers the ample goods. Flaws do exist, evident the second the game begins, and settling in takes patience and a depth of understanding that will weigh on the casual player, but once the strength of the enormous story and dauntingly sophisticated character growth begin to bloom, a forest of intrigue swallows you whole. Designers BioWare have kept true to their PC heritage, packing in so much customization and fastidious attentions to the pen-and-paper RPG sensibilities that you really do feel like you're in control of your character's storied destiny. Even before you set out on the massive adventure, the choice of a character with entirely unique attributes is yours; my imagination was sparked with the idea of commanding a scout, someone more to my liking who would find value in observation and the spirit of intelligent travel.

Like your typical console RPG, Knights of the Old Republic follows a fairly linear path of play, branching most drastically for minigames and side missions that compel you to tackle but aren't crucially attached to the main thrust of the plot. Taking place 4,000 years before the birth of the Empire, familiar Star Wars themes and visual cues are joined by a wealth of new and flavorful sights and sounds that bring a fresh perspective that, I believe, is greatly needed. The voice acting is superb, and for once what the characters are saying really does leave a mark. You play the story as much as it plays you, making decisions that place you intimately close to the action: lean toward the dark side or chose the goodness of light, it's your choice, and you make it often and with huge consequence. Often times in an RPG, the implications are overtly scripted, but here you're the one convincingly occupying this world, living with your decisions in a free-form manner that is rare in a video game. Battles also follow this overriding rule of open choice. An unusual mix between real-time and turn-based,

> "It is with this beguiling spell that Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic delivers the ample goods."

the confrontations with the enemy start low key and even a little dull—nothing new to an RPG player—building to intense, challenging moments of boiling adrenaline. I found the interface clumsy at first, with the ability to cue stacks of commands across your party prosaic, but through time you start to discover how much fun the system can be, especially when the bigger threats rear their very ugly alien heads.

Any faults with the mechanics behind the game can very easily be a byproduct of personal taste in the choice of style and design; if this is your thing, revel in the goodness. It's in the visual choices that leaves me wanting the most. The game shows high points of inspiration and technical achievement, but there is a pallor of inelegance and flat artistry that too often leaves the work in the hands of the gameplay. When the game looks its best, there still is an absence of wonderment that exists in the most compelling of adventure games. But not every game must be a gallery of remarkable visions to sing. Knights of the Old Republic plays its music bolder than any Star Wars game before it. **B**







Mario Golf

Toadstool Tour

Another terrific game of golf from Camelot, but is it fresh enough?



system: gamecube
developer: camelot software planning
publisher: nintendo
available: now

"The game is huge fun to play, but I can't say that I enjoyed the experience more than the N64 version"





No doubt Mario Golf looks great in the classic Nintendo style. Get into it



As I've written in the past, Camelot Software Planning, the developer of Mario Golf, would have had to work at screwing up this GameCube version. The game's predecessor on N64 was an instantly enjoyable and occasionally inspired game of golf. So really all that was needed was a graphical overhaul to bring the game up to date.

And that's exactly what Camelot has done. Changes to the basic gameplay are minimal. The shot meter has been tweaked ever so slightly, and there is now a nearly fully automatic shot system for inexperienced players. In addition, a new speed golf mode has been incorporated, and this joins the returning ring challenges and various stroke and match play modes to bring a good wealth of gameplay options to the table.

So really the biggest change here is a graphical one, and Camelot has done a superb job. The courses are bright and colorful and designed with a great deal of wit and attention to detail, especially in the later fantasy levels. You'll notice some pretty good grass and water effects as well.

Still, I had a couple of minor issues with the game. Firstly, perhaps in an attempt to make the game even easier to play initially, the designers have chosen to give you more information about a ball's trajectory than in the previous game. Provided you make the shot right, I think you've got a little too good an idea of where the ball is going to go. Personally, I like just a little bit more tension in regards to my knowledge of where the ball will end up. Also, and I kind of hate to say this, I felt a little bit like I had done all this before. Of course, the game is huge fun to play, but I can't say that I really enjoyed the experience more than the N64 version. **B**

Virtual satire

Simpsons Hit & Run



words dave halverson



Replace the violence in Vice City with comedy, the side quests with equal parts platforming and racing—along with the genre's tried-and-true timed pick up and delivery—and you've got this year's franchise surprise, Simpson's Hit & Run. If ever a series was due, it was this one. I mean, a good Simpsons game? What's next, world peace?

From Acclaim to EA, be it action, racing or skating, the reigning kings of satire have been mired in the "Doh!" category for way too long. Pulling them out of their funk and onto the video game A-list is Radical Entertainment, the up-and-coming studio behind the Hulk, in what is surely their best effort to date. As good as Hulk was, it doesn't hold a candle to this; in fact, H&R ranks at the top of the TV-to-game charts, alongside the new Buffy game, Alias, Futurama and TMNT. Moreover—and this is key—it takes the Vice City formula and applies it to animated comedy, paving the way for this genre to truly blossom—talk about the right game at the right time. Do this to South Park and all will be right with the world.

Setting out as Homer—cruising around Springfield in a pink convertible undoing the nastiness he's bestowed upon friends and neighbors—the plot begins to take shape: a caper surrounding Krusty's own Buzz Cola, flying cyber-wasp spy cameras, suspicious black vans, Mr. Burns, crop circles and, of course, alien invaders. After getting your feet wet in Homer's initial escapade, you'll move to Bart, then to Lisa, onto Marge, then hang with Abu before circling back to the family tree for three additional scenarios.



Bart ducks into Moe's for a change of clothes and a cold one



Depending on how far you delve into each, which is left to you, H&R is plenty deep. Perhaps not as deep as Vice City in terms of integrated story, but it's every bit as deep, if not deeper, once you set out on foot, where you can explore and interact with the TPT of Springfield. Just about every glowing door leads to a pack of degenerates just waiting to reward you for any number of dirty deeds.

Sticking to the set parameters—seven core scenarios that run you all over a beaming virtual Springfield—from the railway district to the water front, over mountains, down highways, and everywhere in between, the action is steeped in satire and adult humor. The missions transition from pilot to pedestrian, running amidst a bevy of side quests that take you platforming, racing (to unlock new vehicles), camera busting (bashing hovering cyber-wasps), collecting, and into some enticing vertical and 3D exploration. No matter how dialed in you may be to the task at hand, straying is nearly impossible to resist: the town beckons you to exit the vehicle and go on a binge, like a big polygonal monkey on your back. Ducking into key establishments you can even change clothes (for a price), slipping, say, Homer into a muumuu or Bart into ninja garb—classic stuff. All around you, Springfield is bursting with polish: cars have reflection maps and peel real-time rubber, the skies are merrily painted and animated, trees are modeled with surprising care, and all of the characters look right up to snuff—fat, yellow and altogether disturbing. Aiding you in your endeavors, the entire cast has been blessed with a double jump and attached butt bounce, a speed dash, and the rude and crude kick, along with a panning camera to scope-out a 360° view of your surroundings.

The control, particularly within the game's many diverse driving missions, is also surprisingly good, especially given its scale. Each vehicle boasts physics to match, divided between speed and handling, and weight and durability in league with the mission at hand; in all, there are some 40 vehicles to unlock...some with driver included. The incubating genre's Achilles' heel is dealt a winning hand as well; platforming and running around in the city, while not exactly articulate, is surprisingly adept, making both aspects of the gameplay equally engaging.

In the end, you've got to love where this one comes from, adult satire being the rarest of commodities in modern gaming. There's a running gag in the game about a violent video game called Bonestorm 2 and the heinous mark it burns into the young minds of Springfield. Of course. Marge goes on a ramming mission to destroy trucks delivering it to stores, driving its distribution underground, thus making it Bart's mission in life to find a copy, which in turn leads him down a dark path to score a pirated game. Art imitating art imitating life. Ain't pop-culture grand?

I like *The Simpsons* just fine—maybe not enough to sic TiVo on every episode (this space reserved for *South Park*), but I like it. The game, however, I find imminently more attractive. Essentially the show in real time, Hit & Run is so grandiose in its expanse and artistic rendering it appears altogether more appealing than TV allows—the mark of a truly great cross-over product. Some things are just better in 3D and *The Simpsons* is one of them. Well, at least it is now. **B+**

system: ps2, gc, xbox
developer: radical ent.
publisher: vu games
available: now

"There's a running gag in the game about a violent video game called Bonestorm 2 and the heinous mark it burns into the young minds of Springfield."







reviews

game of the month

074 F-Zero GX

Sega certainly know their way around the arcade racer, and they bring their considerable talents to Nintendo's F-Zero series





Charlie's Angels

and a car hitting a moose.

system: gamecube · publisher: ubi soft
developer: neko ent · available: now

D



Final Fantasy Tactics Advance

system: game boy advance · developer: square-enix · publisher: nintendo · available: september



Rock & Roll Racing

When Rock & Roll Racing appeared on the SNES approximately a decade ago, it was a unique revelation, an audio feast featuring mind-blowing licensed music and audio commentary mixed with incredibly fun RC-style racing combat and irreverent sci-fi. Today on the GBA, this almost-perfect port is still a blast to play, but it's not as impressive as it once was and the controls suffer (specifically, using turbo doesn't always work) due to the GBA's reduced-button setup. Still, it's sure to please if you loved the original or just want a different kind of racer. *-CH*

dev: mass media · available: now

B



Shining Soul

Remember those import Japanese action/RPGs of old? No? Well, they went something like this... You need to save the region from a monster, and to do so you'll have to battle through legions of minions and kill large guardian beasts, checking back into the village to re-provision supplies and weapons along the way. You can play through the game as Archer, Warrior, Dragonute, or Wizard, essentially beating the stuffing out of lots of little monsters on the way to each area's big one. What's always made these games charming is the character design, along with that incessant desire to reach the next plateau's new graphics and range of new monsters. Shining Soul is a little light on dialogue and only has one village but it supports up to four players and sticks to a formula steeped in nostalgia. *-DH*

C-



Scooby-Doo! Night of 100 Frights

Talk about late to the party. After nearly a year of distribution on the PS2, and more recently the GameCube, Heavy Iron's formidable Scooby-Doo game comes to the Xbox. Problem is, it's the exact same game, which by last year's standards is still good, but couldn't they have at least added some bump mapping or something while we waited? Still, this is a quality action adventure and still the best game around on four legs. Scooby and Shaggy pull some crazy double duty, and on the platforming front, it's tons of fun, boasting every staple in the book, from swinging pendulum play to collapsing platforms and everything in between. Night of 100 Frights is a formidable game in its own right that benefits all the more by spot-on performances by characters from a TV series that defined crude animation and campy fun 20 minutes at a time since we were all knee-high to Scrappy Doo. *-DH*

• **system:** xbox • **developer:** heavy iron • **publisher:** thq • **available:** now

B-

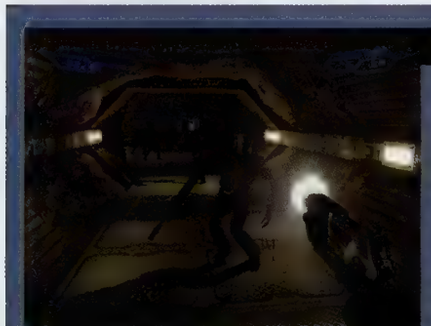


Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Wrath of the Darkhul King

Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Wrath of the Darkhul King is fairly run-of-the-mill platformer that manages to be fun in spite of its unspectacular nature. It all boils down to basic action and platforming staples, and if things were just a bit more inventive and fast-paced, the combos and weapons just a bit more useful, then the game could have been really good. The graphics and music are pretty nice, and the license is put to excellent use with digitized cutscenes and top-notch dialogue, but it could have been a lot more. Still, I'm glad it's not just licensed shovelware. *-CH*

• **system:** gba • **developer:** natsume • **publisher:** thq • **available:** now

C+



Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter

With the FPS genre overflowing with strong titles, forgiving the weaker efforts like Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter for their faults is becoming harder. This isn't an awful game, just so average, rough and predictable at everything it does that you find yourself quickly ready to call it quits. But move on, and you discover a little variety added in with space shooting levels, which are awkward and tedious. I also found the control to be off just enough that it became a consistent problem. Add to all this enemies that act more scripted than smart and you've got the bottom-dweller of the bunch. *-BF*

• **system:** xbox • **developer:** warthog • **publisher:** crave • **available:** now

C-

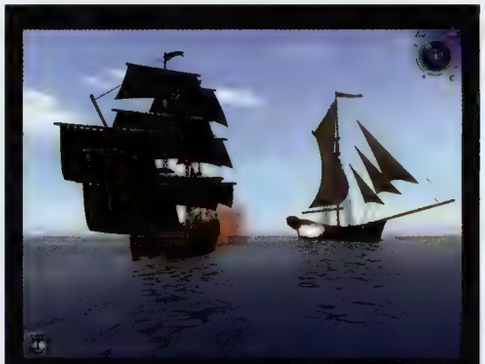


Ghost Recon: Island Thunder

I've really got to give it up for Ubi Soft—for taking an already great title and giving us trigger-happy mofos a brand new game to play. Ghost Recon: Island Thunder takes us down to everybody's favorite vacation spot, Cuba. Once again, players are treated to some nail-biting tactical gameplay thanks to some kick-ass AI. And when you have team members that anticipate enemy fire and react with extreme precision, you know you're in good company. Although the single-player campaign is relatively short (only eight missions), the heart and soul of Island Thunder is the Xbox Live gameplay. Now supporting downloadable content and stat tracking, Island Thunder is definitely worth engaging online. *-TH*

• **system:** xbox • **developer:** red storm ent. • **publisher:** ubi soft • **available:** now

B+





Pirates of the Caribbean

Instead of the marketing-driven production you might expect, Pirates of the Caribbean is a deep and interesting role-playing experience. It emphasizes not just combat, but also the other two Cs: commerce and communication. You can pursue profit legally or not; the game allows you to win by going legit, trading peacefully with various ports of call. Once you're out on the ocean, you're treated to sometimes breathtaking, sometimes frustrating graphics. The player models aren't always detailed enough, the sword animations are just lame, and it would've been nice to have Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp's character) in the game to add a little comic relief. In the end, however, Pirates of the Caribbean is an enjoyable game and one that any would-be pirate can enjoy. *-TH*

• **system:** xbox, pc • **developer:** akella • **pub:** bethesda softworks • **available:** now

C+

play online

Welcome to Vana'diel

Final Fantasy XI Online PC Beta **First Look**

The wait is very nearly over for Final Fantasy XI. What did we make of the PC beta?



words michael hobbs

system: pc (also ps2)
developer: squaresoft
publisher: square enix
available: october (pc)

"True to form, Square does not mess about when it comes to graphics, even in a game where the complexities of online play conspire to keep everything as simple as possible."

Well, where to begin talking about this most epic of online RPGs? First, a disclaimer from your humble writer. The breadth of my experience with online RPGs has been limited to Phantasy Star Online. I point this out because I may wax lyrical about some of the great features of FFXI, of its apparent depth and scope, without being aware that something like EverQuest may have already done it. Why am I not familiar with EverQuest? Because I am fussy, I guess. EQ was simply too ugly and too awkward in its presentation for me to ever get into. I need some measure of aesthetic polish if I am to devote myself to such a large game.

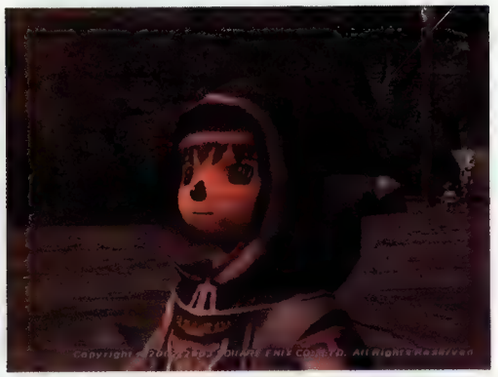
Which I suppose is as good a place as any to begin talking about FFXI. True to form, Square does not mess about when it comes to graphics, even in a game where the complexities of getting the thing to work online and cross platform (PC, PS2) conspire to keep everything as simple as possible. But as Sonic Team understood so well, online RPGs are going to get heavy play time, and if the world isn't up to snuff, people will grow tired of it. Hence Square has packed this thing to the gills with detail. The world is massive, yet you can run into any number of interior environments and be almost awed at the level of detail.

Again, this is especially impressive considering the ambition of the game itself, which is huge. Compared with PSO, this game is so open and organic in its structure. You don't join a team and then dive into an environment. Here, everyone is running around freely. You might see a team heading for a quest and decide to join them, or you may just want to help out a team of struggling newbies. Regardless, the sense of freedom is truly wonderful, and it also means that the game has a much stronger single player component, as there isn't much delineation between things that must be accomplished as a team and those that can be accomplished solo. Of course, being part of a team is the most fun, but the severe drop in exp gained in big parties means that you generally only team up out of necessity.

There is so much more to discuss about FFXI Online and we will be bringing you additional updates in the following months as we delve deeper into the world of Vana'diel. Rest assured that interested parties are in for a massive treat.













This selection of shots shows off my first two characters created in Final Fantasy XI. The big one is a Galka monk called Gustaf. This powerhouse levels up fast and hits hard. The cute little TaruTaru is Monchichi, a wicked little black mage. Notice how my Galka looks different from shot to shot, reflecting the delightful detail of seeing new clothing being reflected on the character model. Nothing new, but well done here.









FFXI is a deep and complex game, with many layers at work all the time. You play not only for yourself, but also for the benefit of your chosen kingdom. Amidst all this adventure and action, notice the delicate and artisitic way the flowers are rendered. To me, this little detail says a lot about the care and talent that went into every aspect of this game.

Checkpoint PlayOnline

Before you play FFXI, you must launch the PlayOnline viewer, which is almost like an OS unto itself. From here, you can use a fully functioning e-mail service, enter chat rooms or send messages to other players or friends online. You can also customize the background image and music, even add ambient sound effects. Just think of those great operating systems that we see in Japanese [illegible] not too far off the mark. It's very cool. It's also the portal for Final Fantasy XI and Tetra Master, the card game from FFIX, now playable online.



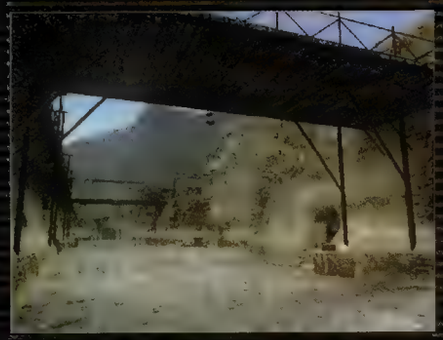
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Choose your starting point

When you create a character in Final Fantasy XI, you are given a choice of three starting points. Each area has its own native characters, quests, and missions. Though you may start in any country with any character, choosing to start your character in his or her native land will give you slight advantages, like a special ring which raises a couple of your stats right out of the gate. As you progress in the game, you will be eventually able to travel by airship to any country.

The Republic of Bastok





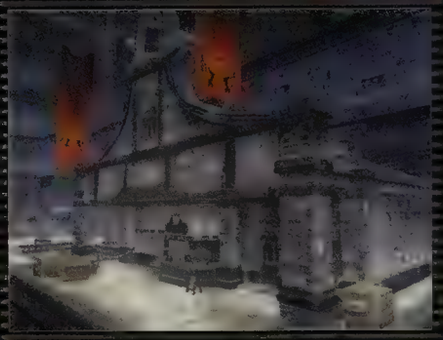
Home to the Hume and Galka. Humes are your basic all-around characters, able to perform well at each job. Laboring in the mines of Bastok, the hulking Galka make powerful monks.

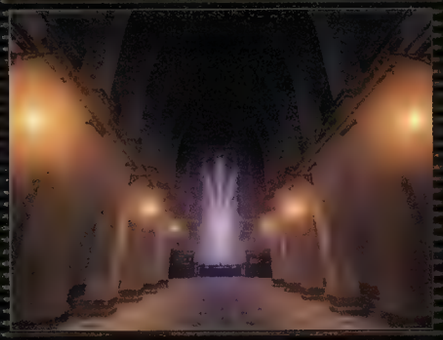
Native Races



Hume Galka

The Kingdom of San d'Oria





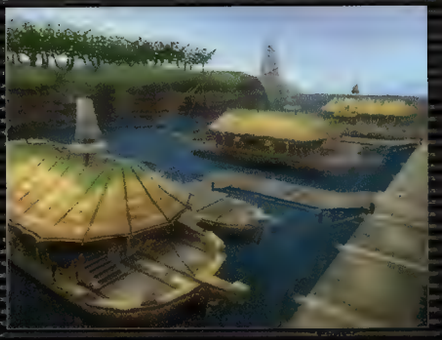
San d'Oria is home to the powerful and beautiful Elvaan race. These characters make excellent warriors and impress everyone with their graceful appearance.

Native Race



Elvaan

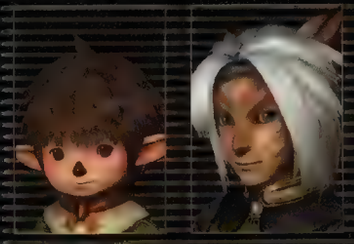
The Federation of Windurst





The charming Windurst is home to the TaruTaru and Mithra races. The diminutive TaruTaru excel in the magic arts and make powerful mages. The cat-like Mithra value nature above all else, and make excellent monks and thieves.

Native Races



TaruTaru Mithra

Checkpoint **What will it cost?**

Though pricing has yet to be announced by Square, we can look at the Japanese model and have a guess. In Japan, a game subscription is around 10 dollars a month, with an additional one dollar charged per character. The character fee is precipitated by the fact that character data is held on their servers and not your hard drive. We can expect fairly similar pricing in the U.S.

Checkpoint **Job System**

Final Fantasy XI employs an involving job system, wherein your character can learn from a large pallette of abilities as you level up. Beginning with a basic job, such as a black mage, you can learn abilities specific to that class and then switch jobs, allowing you to learn further skills that were previously unavailable. In addition to basic job switching (which sends your character back to level one), you can also learn skills through sub jobs, though these cannot reach the full level of a main job.



Star Wars Galaxies
An Empire Divided

The force is mediocre in this one

words tom ham

system: pc
developer: sony online entertainment
publisher: lucasarts
available: now

After a lot of hype and anticipation, Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided has finally arrived. Is it what I expected? Totally. Is it what I wanted? Not quite. Now don't get me wrong, there are things about Galaxies that are truly wonderful; in fact there is plenty to get excited about. But with any game of this nature, there is always some level of expectation and with that there will continually be some disappointment.

For those of you unfamiliar, Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game set in the Star Wars Universe. This is a living, breathing Star Wars world that is alive 24/7. With over 10 worlds (from the films and expanded universes), each measuring over 15 X 15 kilometers, almost every possible detail is represented and the end result is nothing short of breathtaking. The first time I set foot in Mos Eisley and saw all of the interaction between droids, humans and wookiees, I truly wept. Plus hearing the John Williams music in the background gave me goose bumps on top of goose bumps.

As with most MMORPGs, getting started in Galaxies was a breeze. First, players have to create a character. There are eight playable races ranging from humans and Wookiees to Rodians and Mon Calamari. In true RPG fashion, each race comes with their own strengths and weaknesses. For example, Wookiees are the strongest but not as smart as humans. And while the Mon Calamari aren't the best in combat, they have healing abilities which others don't possess. After customizing your character's outside features (face, body type, color, etc) players then pick one of the 30 possible professions (basically your character class). Without question, this is by far the most important aspect of Galaxies, because this basically lays out how you will play the game. Professions include marksman, medic, scout, brawler, artisan and entertainer. With each profession, there are core skills that you have to develop. Through time and experience, these core skills turn into specializations which later can be used to reach advanced classes.

What's interesting about Galaxies is that in order to get the most out of the game, players have to interact with one another. Unlike other MMORPGs where a player can get by just by communicating with NPCs, in Galaxies you need your peeps. For example, marksmen and brawlers need medics and entertainers to heal them. Different types of equipment can be created by Artisans who later can sell them. This whole dynamic of social interaction is a great way to get into your roles.

Unfortunately, all of this Star Wars goodness does have some major shortcomings: namely character advancement and lack of depth in the gameplay. While early progress with your character is relatively quick, it's when you want to advance to the higher levels and gain the cooler skills that the game fails to hit hyperspace. I played for what seemed like days before I earned my expert marksmanship skill. And that was just the first level of it! I can see where the game designers are coming from (they basically want to make it really impossible to become a Jedi) but if the game continues to give cheap rewards for major time investments (and at $14.99 a month), Galaxies will fail miserably. I don't care how many Star Wars fans are out there; this crap gets old real quick.

And while the social aspect is very interesting in Galaxies, the combat is relatively boring and uninspiring. If I have to shoot one more hopping rodent (to gain experience) I'm going to scream! I don't know, maybe I want too much. I just imagined myself storming enemy structures or rescuing Rebel soldiers taken hostage or something! The lack of any really cool things to do may turn off even the most ardent Star Wars fan.






Unfortunately, you can't play through Star Wars Galaxies as a huge-ass gangster slug.

Luckily for fans (and me) it's still early in the Galaxies lifecycle; there is still a lot of room to grow. The game designers can still make changes to improve the gameplay and give it the depth that it so desperately needs. Maybe they don't realize that players who currently play MMORPGs are much savvier then they were when EverQuest first came out and with other games looming on the horizon (FFXI and City of Heroes) that just slapping a Star Wars name on a prettier version of EverQuest just isn't going to cut it. One's personal time is a precious commodity and something that all of us hate to waste. Let's hope LucasArts and crew can save Galaxies from further peril. **B-**

2003 Football Round-up

words lom ham

With the regular football season kicking off this month, we thought it would be appropriate to check out the latest and greatest football games for all the major platforms. All the usual suspects are here including Sega, EA Sports, Sony/989 Sports and Microsoft. The name of the game this year is online. Whether it's stat tracking, setting up leagues and tournaments or just plain matchmaking, each game has made huge strides in this arena and the winner in all of this is you, the player. From deeper Dynasty modes to real-time sports tickers to first-person football, it's all covered here. So which game is Hall of Fame bound? What game will surprise you? Sit back and pop a cold one; here's the lowdown...

Madden NFL 2004

system: playstation 2, gc, xbox, pc
developer: ea tiburon
publisher: ea sports
available: now

If you demand the ultimate in presentation and extras, look no further than Madden NFL 2004. New for 2004 is Owner Mode where you will take over all financial, management and marketing responsibilities of your team. Don't worry, you're still responsible for coaching and player duties (in Franchise mode), but now you've got a whole new bag of tricks to play with. You can even create your own stadiums, parking structures, logos and team uniforms. The level of depth in Owner mode alone is mind-blowing.

Another key feature is Playmaker Control. Utilizing the right analog stick, players can quickly change plays, direct receivers, change routes and even adjust coverage—all on the fly. Online gameplay has been overhauled as well, with new gameplay modes, tournaments, updatable rosters and a new ranking system. Quick Match allows users to find other players who match their skill level—a feature Madden needed last year. A welcome addition is the Fair Play functionality which lays down rules and prevents cheating. For 2004, the developers have gone the extra yard and have included the actual team's playbooks, including team specific formations.

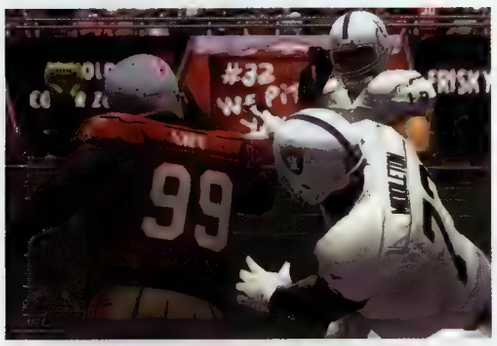
The overall presentation of the game has also been upgraded as well. From the split-screen replays and specialty animations to the cool fade ins and transition effects, you would swear you were watching the real thing. Visually, Madden is tops. Player models are now more authentic—they included mullets, tattoos and even different helmet types. New animations like stumbling with the ball, pick-offs and new QB scramble transitions just make the game that much better.

Bottom line is this: if you want the complete experience —both online and offline—then Madden NFL 2004 is it. Everything from the music, sound, graphics and gameplay is proof that this is an incredibly well thought out game. Going into its 14th year, Madden is looking better than ever. A+

"If you demand the ultimate in presentation and extras, look no further than Madden NFL 2004."









ESPN NFL Football

system: playstation 2, gc, xbox
developer: visual concepts
publisher: sega
available: now

Without question, Sega made an indelible mark in the football arena with NFL 2K3, a game that was tuned and tweaked to perfection. Their latest, which is now called ESPN NFL Football, continues this trend with new features, new gameplay modes and some of the best tackling animations in the business. Although it's not perfect by any means, it still has enough going for it that sets it apart from the rest.

Going against a powerhouse such as Madden, developers need to create new experiences that give players that little something extra. Two big additions to Sega's game this year is the Crib and First Person Football. The Crib is all about bragging rights, and the way it is utilized in the game is pretty innovative. While you're playing, the game will issue you challenges, ranging from your basic ones like scoring a TD on your first possession or running a punt back for six points to more involved challenges such as winning several games in a row or completing 100 yards rushing. Whenever you complete a challenge, not only do you unlock a cool feature in the game (new stadiums, old-school jerseys, etc.), you also unlock Crib items, which include bobble heads, bar stools, posters, etc. These will be placed in your Crib where you can then later show off to your peeps. The Crib is definitely a nice incentive to keep playing the game.

Next is First Person Football. Sure it's fun playing the game from this perspective, but quite honestly, the novelty wears off after the first few times playing. My biggest gripe–too many dropped passes. I realize real-life players drop balls now and then, but dropping 10-15 passes every game? That is totally unacceptable. On the flip side, a big improvement this year is the play calling. Instead of the god awful "hey, look at the play I'm calling" format of previous years, ESPN NFL Football has now adopted the popular menu-driven, three play option that most football games use. Visually, ESPN NFL Football is top notch, especially the tackle and running animations. No other football game comes close in this area. Coupled with tight controls and great online play, ESPN NFL Football is a fine success. A-

"Visually, ESPN NFL Football is top notch...no other football game comes close..."

NFL Fever 2004

system: xbox
developer: microsoft game studios
publisher: microsoft game studios
available: now

The release of NFL Fever 2003 made me scratch my head. How could Microsoft release such an average game? Basically it was a carbon copy of Fever 2002 with updated rosters—big deal. Microsoft fumbled the ball. This year's game is a whole other story. It truly is amazing how much a difference a year can make.

With the incorporation of XSN, new passing controls and improved tackling, NFL Fever 2004 gives Xbox owners a reason to rejoice. In order to play Fever this year, whether you're a casual player or hardcore, you have to create a User Profile. This User Profile is your lifeline. Not only does it track your stats and win/loss records, but more importantly, it retains your gameplay settings. So every time you play Fever 2004, it remembers your controller config, display settings, play-calling method, game speed, etc. The amount of customization is rather impressive. A big problem with Fever 2003 was that passing was literally a no-brainer. Your receiver could be 50 yards downfield and if you were to throw it to him, 9 times out of 10, he would catch it. That's not the case anymore. Passing has been completely overhauled, both for the beginning and more advanced players. For newbies, you can use the traditional one-button icon-passing method. For the pros out there, Fever 2004 has a key new innovation called Read and Lead Passing. Basically you control where the ball is going to land, not to a specific receiver. So after you hike the ball, you still move your QB with the left stick. At the same time, using your right stick, you control a small cursor downfield. After you throw the ball, the intended receiver will then run for the ball. If you timed it correctly, the ball will get to the receiver while he's running. This opens up a wide playing field of options. Defensive guy covering too tight? No problem, just aim the ball close to the ground so your receiver can dive for the ball away from the defender. Although it'll take some time to get used to (don't worry, there is a great Practice mode in the game) it really makes the game that much more challenging. Other key improvements include the integration of XSN. As I talked about in our July issue, XSN is Microsoft's all new sports network where players can set up leagues, tournaments and ladders. In addition, you can view standings, scores and stats of other players. What's cool is that you can access this info from your PC too. So if you're at the office, you can still see how you're doing.

Overall the graphics look great in NFL Fever 2004, but not fantastic. Even though the faces on the individual player models are incredibly photo-realistic and lifelike, the player body models look a little disjointed. I will say the player animations, as a whole, have been improved from last year's game and thankfully the developers got rid of the stupid running motion they were using. The one area of the game that still needs major improvements is the play-by-play commentary. Why did Microsoft resign Kevin Calabro and Ron Pitts? Get rid of those guys! B

"...NFL Fever 2004 gives Xbox owners a reason to rejoice."





NFL GameDay 2004

system: playstation 2
developer: red zone interactive
publisher: sony computer entertainment america/989 sports
available: now

It was no secret that last year's GameDay just couldn't keep up with the likes of Madden or NFL 2K3, but things are definitely looking up this time around for 989 Sports, and NFL GameDay 2004 has come ready to play. The first thing players will notice are the new player models. Unlike last year's game where the all the players looked almost identical, each player has been recreated to match their real-life counterpart. Not only can you see facial details, you can actually see fingers moving. Other details like tattoos, visors and neck rolls are included as well. On the flipside, the player animations still need a lot of work, especially the tackles and transition animations (but there's always next year).

Gameplay has been tweaked as well. AI is much improved. The pass rush is more intense, the defensive secondary adjusts quicker and receivers will now automatically find an alternate route. The game also incorporates new pressure-sensitive controls. So moves like jukes, spins and stiff arms will all have different levels of intensity depending on how hard you're pressing the button. Play selection has also been streamlined. I especially liked the Play Filter feature. This allows players to quickly access situation specific plays rather than sifting through pages and pages of other plays. Nice touch.

Another key addition is voice control. Imagine controlling things on screen with only your voice. Using a USB headset (like the one in SOCOM), you can call over 42 different commands. From "Hike" to "Audible" to "Timeout" to "Hot Routes," it's all very cool. But by far the best new feature of NFL GameDay 2004 is its online package. For starters, you're immediately connected online and logged in automatically right when you start the game. From there you can go to the 989 Sports lobby where they've built a huge community where you can chat (using your voice) to other players. You can even chat with folks playing other 989 Sports games. In addition to news and updates from 989 Sports, players will see standings, stats, tournament announcements and even messages from other players. What's unique about 989's setup is that since you're connected from the start, anything you do can be launched offline or online. So if you're at home with a friend and you wanted to go online, you don't need to "log in," so to speak. Since you're already connected, you can indicate you want to "take the game online" and, boom, you're in a game lobby waiting for someone to challenge you. The seamless integration of online with the offline is a big selling point for GameDay. And to top it off, it has a built-in sports ticker, so while you're playing, you'll see all the scores for all major sports scroll across the bottom of your screen. And last but not least, the intro for GameDay 2004 is unbelievable. It will totally get you pumped up to play some ball and hearing the voice of football, Earl Mann, makes it all the more cooler. Well done, boys. B+

"The seamless integration of online with the offline is a big selling point for GameDay."





1080: Avalanche

"And making things a little more interesting, 1080: Avalanche is going to have...well, avalanches."

system: ps2, xbox, gamecube
developer: nintendo software technology corp
publisher: nintendo of america
available: september





Before there was Amped, Cool Boarders or even SSX, the only way you could surf down a snow- covered mountain was in 1080 Snowboarding, released on the N64 in 1998. It's hard to believe we've had to wait five years for the next version of this classic game: "This is something we're really excited about," says Chris "Grit" Campbell, product development lead for Nintendo of America. "The team over at NST are totally stoked to bring this title to the GameCube. New boarders, new mountains to conquer, a host of tricks and grabs – I really can't wait for this." Where games like Amped go for more of the simulation and SSX definitely more arcade, 1080 Avalanche is going to lie somewhere in the middle. Playing the most recent version of the game, I was blown away by the texture detail and smoothness of the controls. The look and style of the boarders. The smooth transitioning of the tricks. Just watching the snow and powder fly up from under my board brought a huge smile to my face. This was the 1080 Snowboarding that I knew and loved.

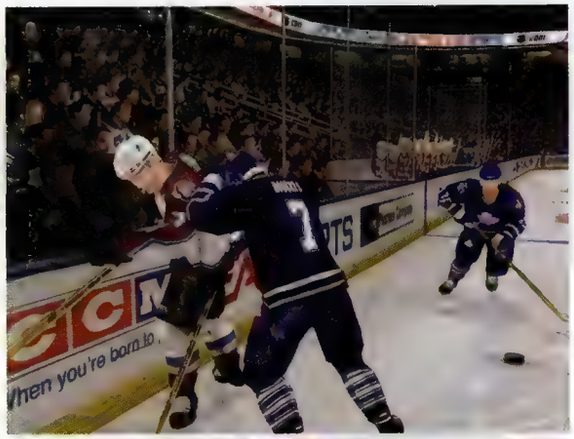
1080: Avalanche incorporates some pretty nifty new features as well: one of these is the character-balancing system. With most snowboarding games, after you perform a trick or grab, landing is pretty much a cakewalk. Usually as long as your board is underneath you when you land, your rider will continue down the mountain without incident. Not with Avalanche. If you don't land exactly right, your rider will start to wobble from side to side and an off-balance indicator will appear. Only by quickly adjusting yourself will you regain control of your rider. This added level of challenge made the whole snowboarding experience that much more realistic. Anther key addition is a damage meter. If you hit too many trees or rocks, or land too hard too many times, you might find yourself chilling at the ski lodge instead of the slopes.

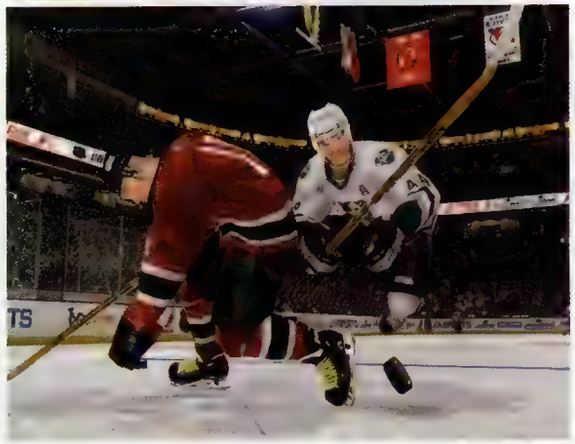
And making things a little more interesting, 1080: Avalanche is going to have...well, avalanches. "Players not only have to worry about other riders, but the Mother Nature herself—massive avalanches, rock slides and bridges collapsing," explains Campbell. "Some of these will even change the course so you'll have to find an alternate route. Very exciting stuff."

NHL 2004

"Not to be outdone, EA Sports has upped the ante with NHL 2004 and it truly has left me speechless. What am I so excited about? One word - Dynasty Mode."

system: ps2, xbox, gamecube, pc
developer: electronic arts black box
publisher: ea sports
available: now





Last year, Sega pulled an ace from their sleeves with their incredibly deep Franchise mode for NHL 2K3. Not only was it more in-depth than EA's but the game played more realistically. Not to be outdone, EA Sports has upped the ante with NHL 2004 and it truly has left me speechless. What am I so excited about? One word – Dynasty Mode. Where Madden NFL 2004 lets you play the game as the owner, NHL 2004 has you playing the GM. Every decision you make, every player choice, every staff change – all have an immediate outcome. The name of the game is Experience Points and players can earn them a number of ways. GMs can earn points by having high attendance at games or staying below salary caps – thus improving their profit margin. Winning titles and signing key players also play a part in your development as a top-notch GM. What's cooler is that with the points you earn, GMs can purchase upgrades. Upgrades include improving facilities, hiring new staff and improving your scouting ability. What's amazing here is how all of these upgrades work together to affect the way your team will perform. So if you put more money into marketing, this will boost your attendance. Increase your team travel spending and watch your team's morale increase. This is what Dynasty mode is all about and I would imagine other sports games will follow suit with this level of detail.

As always, the visuals in NHL 2004 are exceptional. EA Sports has increased the number of hitting animations so players are treated to more body checks and player collisions. Rounding out this stellar hockey title is improved player AI, a great selection of teams and of course, and online gameplay (which is only on PS2 and PC). For hockey fans, this is a no brainer. **A**



Tsubasa is a shy elementary schoolgirl with very few friends.

One night, she sees a shooting star and follows it to a downed alien spacecraft. The alien gives her a clone named Hikaru, who is as outgoing as Tsubasa is quiet. As Tsubasa teaches her new companion about the world, she rediscovers it herself.

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Figure17

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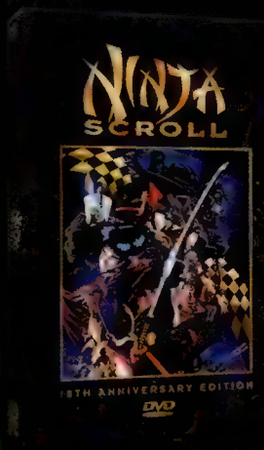
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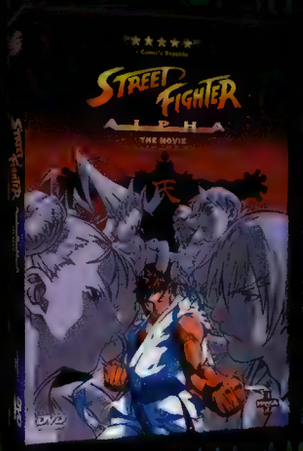




















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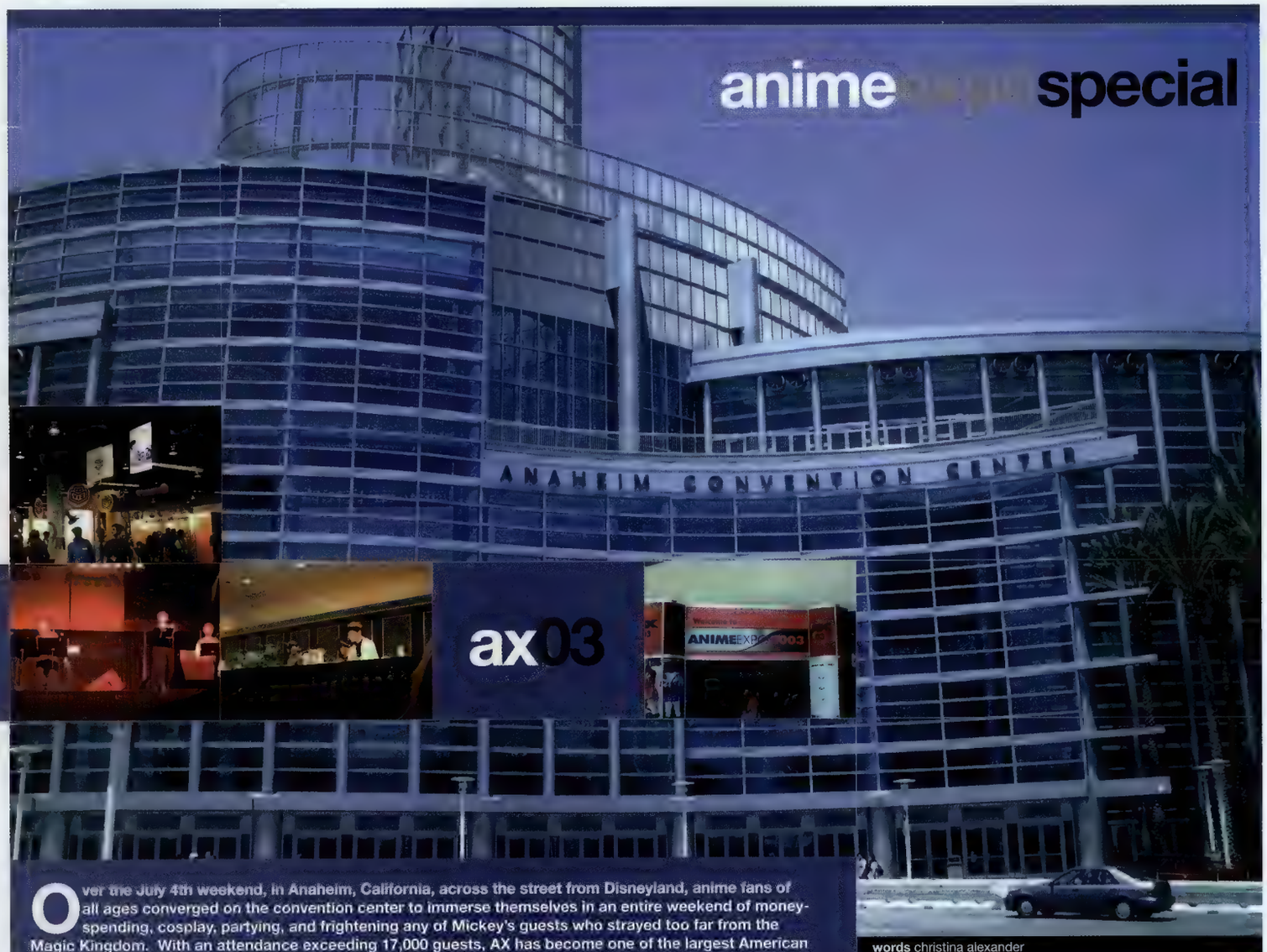
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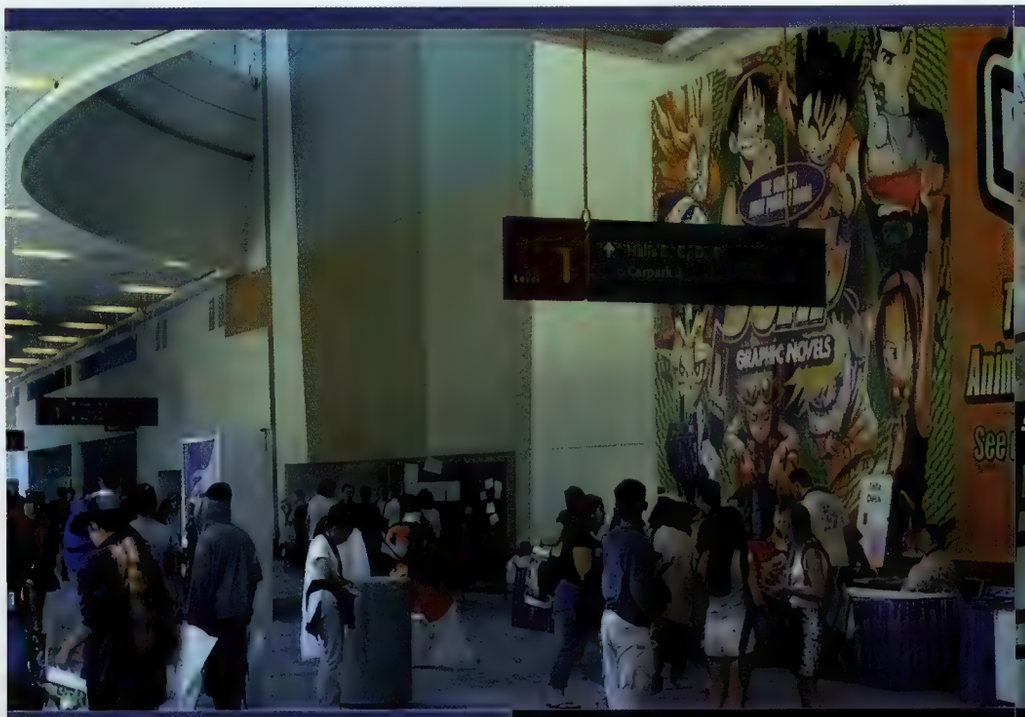
ax03

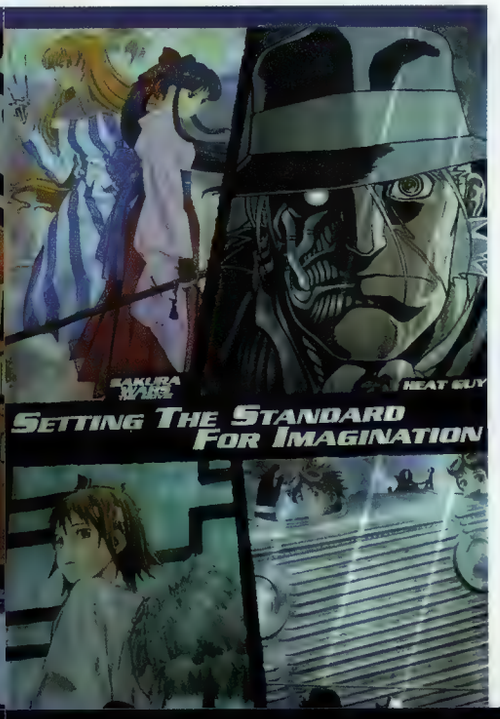
Over the July 4th weekend, in Anaheim, California, across the street from Disneyland, anime fans of all ages converged on the convention center to immerse themselves in an entire weekend of money-spending, cosplay, partying, and frightening any of Mickey's guests who strayed too far from the Magic Kingdom. With an attendance exceeding 17,000 guests, AX has become one of the largest American celebrations devoted exclusively to the world of anime.

words christina alexander









"Man Faye quite literally captivated the entire convention."

After one semi-disastrous year at the Disneyland Hotel, and two mediocre turns in Long Beach, the return to Anaheim clearly had a positive effect on attendees. Lines were shorter, tempers were longer, and the inevitable miasma of unwashed fanatics that seems to haunt all conventions was reduced from previous years.

Cosplay (costume play) was easily the most popular form of weekend entertainment at the expo. After spending anywhere from a few hours to a few months on their costumes, cosplayers descended on AX by the hundreds to show off their anime loyalty, along with their sewing expertise and creativity. The front walkways of the convention center looked like a twisted *Power Rangers* episode. Even with the bright array of costumes, one cosplayer in particular stood out among them all. And his name? Faye Valentine. Man Faye, a cute nickname this brave cosplayer picked up at the show with his rendition of *Cowboy Bebop*'s Faye Valentine, took crossplay (costuming as a member of the opposite sex) to new and unheard-of heights—or lows depending on how you look at it. With his six-foot stature, luxurious leg (and butt) hair, Man Faye quite literally captivated the entire convention.

Expo attendees were treated to more than just shocking costume displays, like the chance to spend their entire month's paycheck in the dealers' hall and anime screenings in multiple viewing rooms which allowed fans to watch anime from dusk 'til dawn. *Junkers Come Here* from Bandai was one of the best choices on the line up. Along with various other events including a J-Rock concert, discussion panels, a music video contest, and a karaoke contest, Anime Expo was an anime fan's four-day dream come true.





HAIBANE RENMEI

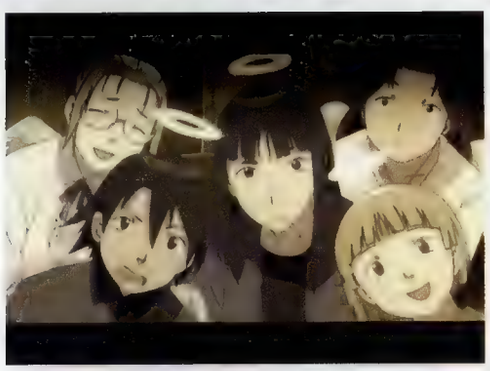
HEAVEN ON EARTH?

words christina alexander

studio: pioneer animation
rating: 13 & up
running time: 100 min
available: now

Imagine slowly waking up from a dream to the sound of muted voices, and having to shove your way free of an unfamiliar cocoon, only to be surrounded by curious onlookers who assist you in entering into a new world. It sounds a lot like birth, except that you are not a tiny baby, and you have full grasp and control of language. You can't remember your name or where you're from. All you can remember of your past is a vague dream, and it doesn't stop there. Before you even begin to orient yourself to this new place, a terrible pain rakes through you as small wings begin to push themselves out through the swollen skin of your back. Your newfound friends keep watch over your slightly grotesque transformation with understanding. Because they have wings too. And small yellow halos that adorn the tops of their heads. With the addition of your own new halo you are now a full member of the Charcoal Feathers. Welcome.

Fresh from the mind of Yoshitoshi Abe (*Serial Experiments Lain*, *Niea_7*), *Haibane Renmei* is a heftily character driven and mildly disturbing new series from Pioneer. *Haibane Renmei*, translated as the Charcoal Feathers Federation, starts off as a captivating mystery and progresses into an addictive puzzle. What are the Charcoal Feathers? Where do they come from? Are they fallen angels? Why do they have to abide by such seemingly strict rules? We are led down a shadowy path, discovering small hints to the answers to those questions at the same time as the young protagonist. Abe's gorgeous and haunting designs are the perfect escort for this enigmatic journey. The most amazing thing about *Haibane Renmei* is the fact that it achieves this level of viewer captivation without the usage of giant robots, space battles, or even the smallest hint of violence. Even if *HR* were animated with stick figures, it would still be able to stand on its formidable storytelling. Abe's newest creation is his best yet.







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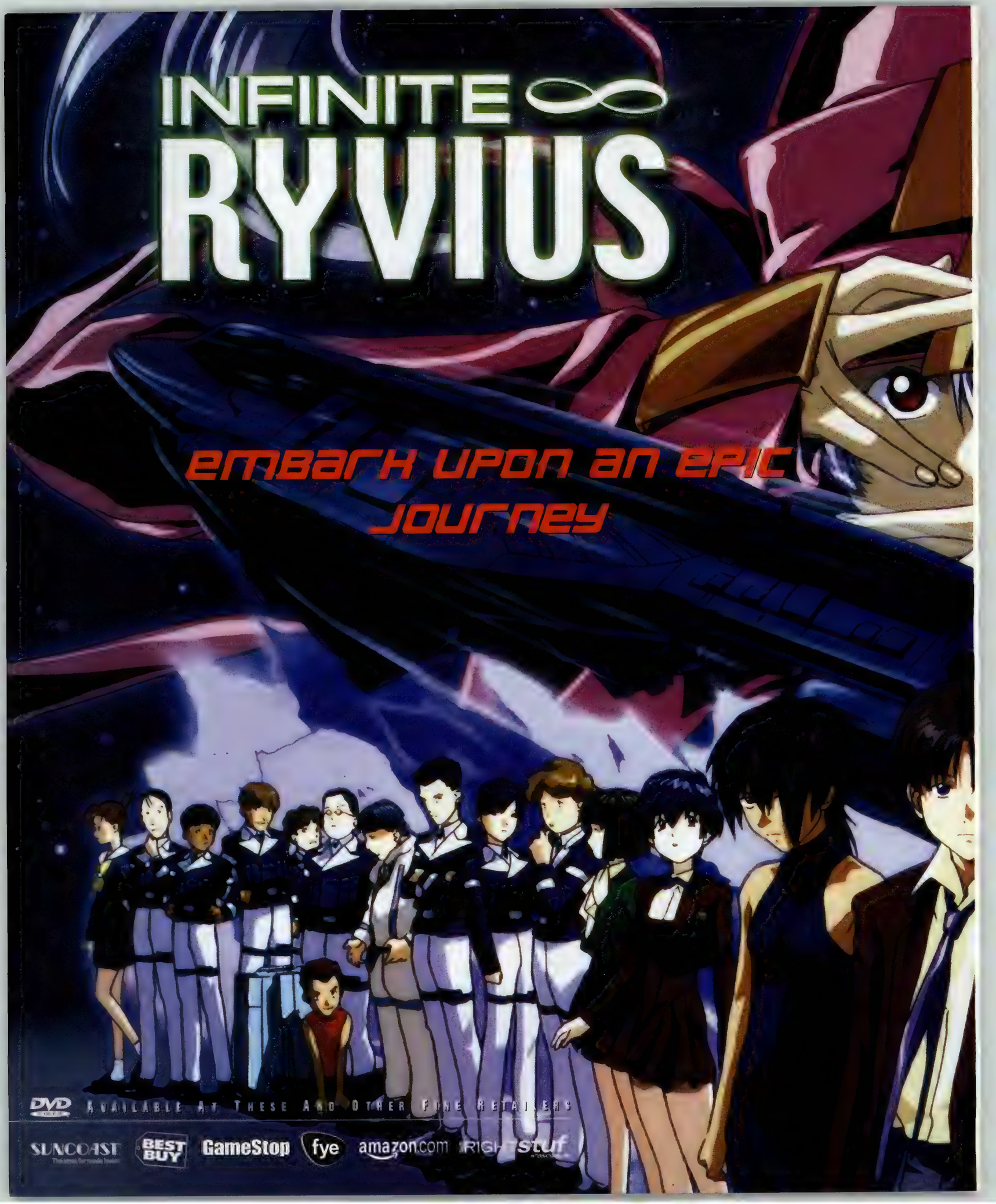
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Initial D

Battle: 01 Akina's Downhill Specialist

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studio: tokyo pop
rating: 13 & up
running time: 150 min w/dual episodes
available: now

words dave halverson

The religion of *Initial D* is finally making its U.S. debut on both DVD and "Adult Swim," and this one really does build excitement, selling over 30 million graphic novels and capturing 47 percent market share in its TV time slot on its way to earning a ludicrous $300 million in the Asian market. Not bad for a series that premiered long before Vin put the pedal to the metal and the tuner car craze busted out beyond people with loud cars and maxed-out Visas. But don't come looking for no shiny digital sissy-boy anime with seamless integrated CGI; the hype on these 41 episodes is about story and racer etiquette, at least what's left of it after they get done "tricking it out."

The story, ripped directly from the manga, has gone under the knife for some gratuitous Western tweaking. To be fair, the places they've dotted with harder rock benefit from the boost, but the skater-boy punk, hip-hop, and rap along with the obligatory lingo, including such hits as "dude," "cha," "bankage" and the always popular "wut up with that?" is so gratuitous it's almost funny. In between episode 1 & 2 we actually hear "was that bitchin' or what!?" Someone needs to let go of the '70s. With the localization for "Swim" and the car culture Stateside, I guess I can sympathize. In the end, they found a way to appease everyone, adding the ability to toggle between the classic and newly polished version, which does have nice new opening and closing sequences. If this wasn't a big 'ol animated hip-hop soap opera, I suppose it wouldn't matter, but it is: the buzz on *Initial D* has been louder then the "Eight Six's" 14 DOHC 130hp engine (before tuneage, that is).

The initial intrigue comes by way of central character Tak, a deadpan, ultra-laid-back high school student and his complete ignorance and general lack of interest in







"The producers insert painted cels in places like rear-view mirrors and slide them between CG layers, creating a fascinating patchwork."

street racing, which happens to be his best friend Iggy's passion in life (besides being an über-goofball). Tak is so oblivious to anything to do with racing that he's clueless to the fact that inadvertently he's the fastest driver on Mount Akina, home to the local street-racing club, The Akina Speed Stars. Driving over it delivering tofu for his dad's shop over the last five years, he's developed mad skills that, until now, he's been oblivious to; and now we get to watch him go from zero to hero. He even gets the girl.

What I find fascinating about Initial D's ghetto-brand CG meets cel animation combo is the contrast between styles, which at times overlap. The producers insert painted cells in places like rear-view mirrors and slide them between CG layers, creating a fascinating patchwork. Elsewhere, the purely CG sequences, though archaic by today's' standards, are so well produced (especially from the driver's-eye view) that they come off more entertaining than productions costing ten times as much. The traditional animation is nothing to write home about either, although the character design and key art, adorned with contrasting facial styles and meticulous car work, are skillfully crafted. I'm in it for the long haul, Ebonics and all. See you in 39 episodes. B+







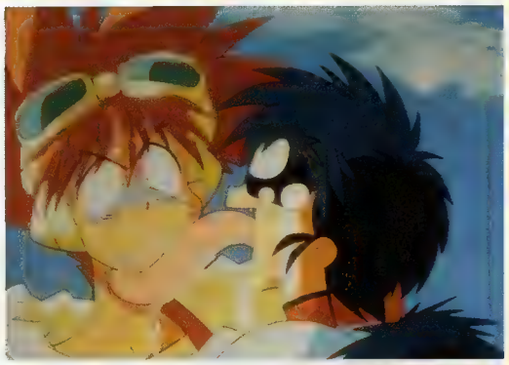


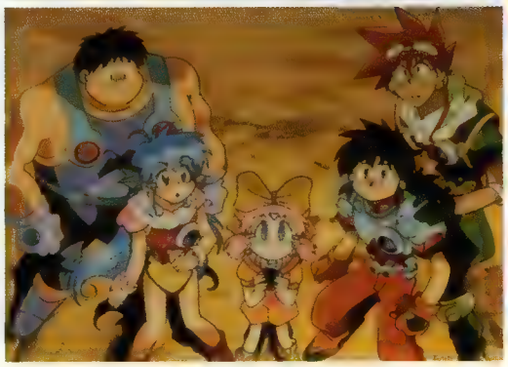
K.O. Beast

studio: right stuf int.
rating: 13 & up
running time: 90 min
available: now

"If you like it wacky, masochistic sidekicks and all, then come on down"

words dave halverson







Like *Bloody Roar*? Fancy a little beast in your DNA? If so, The Right Stuf has a pill you might want to swallow—but beware, the side effects include weird visions and strange circumstances...

Here's the setup: during a time of technological prowess, a war broke out between the humans of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. As the war progressed, weapons of mass destruction were produced called "Jinns," and eventually the Southern forces were banished to a parallel dimension and for a time there was peace. Over the proceeding 10,000 years, the people left on Earth developed into beast/human hybrids in synch with the totems they live under, which are actually the Jinns, now buried under a millennia of rock. The dog, fish, beast and bird people worship them as protection idols, unaware of their true nature. Meanwhile, the banished humans, who fell under the rule of Czar Master, have been plotting their return and ultimate reclaiming of Earth, which is where we come in. In a truly bizarre turn of events, the password (and key, which turns out to be a little girl) to unlock the power of the Jinns falls into the hands of a group of beast-children. The battle between the humans and beasts is on and it is ever a weird one.

If you like it wacky, masochistic side kicks and all, then come on down, because *K.O. Beast* is like an old season of *Lost in Space* wrapped in an anime shell with a side order of Kimba the White Lion. Adventure, comedy and only the kookiest violence from the character designer of Outlaw Star, the Director of Burn Up W, and the creator of Saber Marionette J! Talk about a bad fur day. **C+**

King of Bandit Jing

studio: adv films
rating: 13 & up
running time: 100 min
available: now

"Squeaky clean digital animation combined with bits of CGI drive the impressive visuals"

words dave halverson







Anyone remember Aladdin, or moreover, his kooky parrot Iago, played by Gilbert Gottfried? Well, Jing's got one just like him, named Kir, except that his is an albatross that attaches to his arms and shoots a lethal green energy beam. Oddly enough, this is the most normal thing about *King of Bandit Jing*, a collection of Robin Hood-like scenarios in which the world's greatest bandit travels from place to place, stealing back people's freedom. The series' hook—well, one of many—is its haunting themes laced with mutant curiosities and surreal plot lines, interspersed with distorted Western influences: fairy tales and darkly Disney-esque characters that would make Walt spin in his jar. Western influences aside, both the tone and style remind me of *The Soultaker,* but Jing is also very much a comedy; stranger bedfellows seldom shack up in the same anime.

What really drills it home are the character designs. From the first scene, it's like one long masquerade of freaks and vehicular madness. Land whales, twisted towers, piggy bank monsters, living ship anchors and a smorgasbord of mutants adorn every episode. Squeaky-clean digital animation combined with bits of CGI drive the impressive visuals, and the soundtrack is wickedly irreverent. At the very least, this is an insanely intriguing first volume headed God knows where. **B-**

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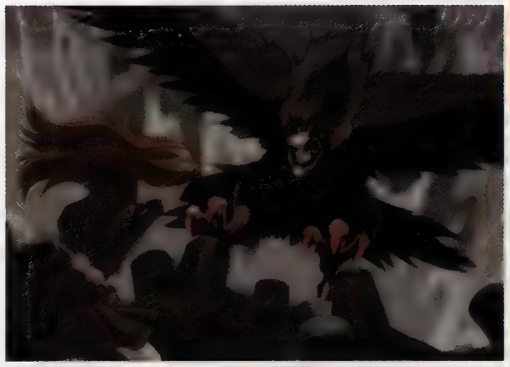
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12 Kingdoms

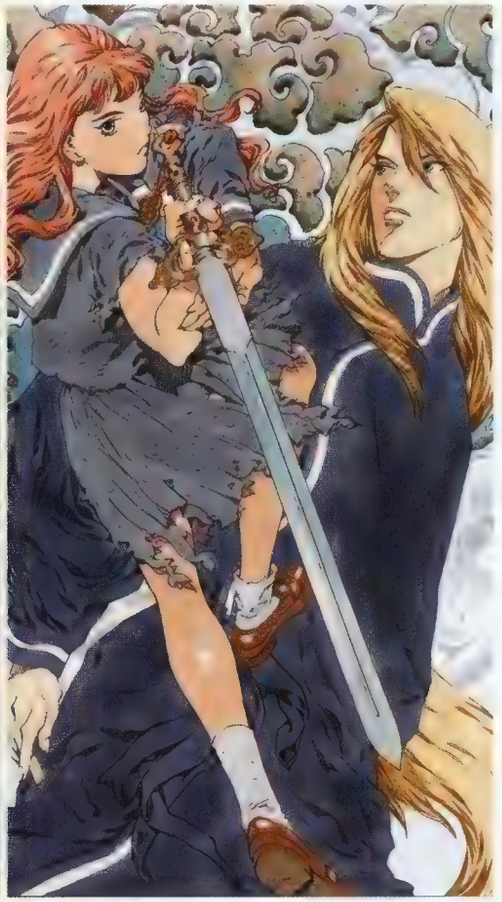
studio: media blasters
rating: 13 & up
running time: 120 min
available: now

"Betrayal and confusion plague all five of these episodes, culminating in the oddest of twists."

words dave halverson







Tales of high school students whisked away into otherworldly situations is nothing new, but in the case of *12 Kingdoms*, it's given an extraordinarily dramatic turn. Class president Youko Nakajima's haunting dreams manifest themselves in the real world when a strange man appears, apparently to serve and protect her, chased into the mortal world by a large demonic falcon. As students fall around her under the massive bird's sonic attacks, she is brought to take up a sword, and accept her fate, in order to slay the beast and protect the student body. Witness to the fray, the school recluse, Yuka, a morbid, quiet girl who craves all that is mystical, and her friend, Ikuya, are swept into her turmoil, and all three are ultimately pulled through a vortex flying on the backs of winged beasts. Seems like a scenario fit for a new queen, does it not? Next she's supposed to take up her new post and rule in a parallel universe, right? Not in this case. There's little otherworldly about the place she and her friends are taken to, where her suitors seemingly have no power, and they disappear, leaving them as prisoners, hated for the destructive storm that brought them.

In dramatic fashion, things begin to spin out of control as Youko mysteriously picks up the foreign dialect and her face begins to change (which we unfortunately aren't yet privy to). Betrayal and confusion plague all five of these episodes, culminating in the oddest of twists, leaving the audience hanging precariously in the balance. Beautifully drawn and animated, if you like drama, complex themes and lots of character development, your wormhole awaits. **B+**

Lupin The 3rd: Secret of Mamo

studio: pioneer animation
rating: 16 & up
running time: 100 min
available: now

"If you're one of the few, the proud, who still fancy reading along to the Japanese, however, this is pure heaven."

words dave halverson







Okay, whaddaya want first, the good news or the bad? Let's just start with the good since I can't hear you. The good news is that one of Lupin's best, *Lupin the 3rd The Secret of Mamo*, is coming to DVD, digitally remastered (on top of the Anime-Vision System, which used more than double the traditional amount of animation cells to produce a brighter, sharper picture for the theatrical release), a 5.1 Japanese track, and anamorphic widescreen. You can read all about it in the full-color reproduction of the movie program from the 1978 theatrical run, located just behind the cool Lupin key chain you get just for prying open the case—don't you just love all those security seals?

Oh, the bad news, right...well, unfortunately it's also got a brand new English dub in which the normally debonair Lupin has become Urkel. High-pitched nasal Lupin, I hate you! And Zenigata...forget it, he's even off his rocker by Zenigata standards. If you're into Lupin, beware, this is one English dub that is extremely hard to swallow. If you're one of the few, the proud, who still fancy reading along to the Japanese, however, this is pure heaven. Lupin's dead, then he's alive, Fujiko is in full bloom, Jigen and Goemon fly the coup, and Mamo, well, he's just a classic nut job. This is hands down one of the best Lupins ever. **B**

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~ i wish you were here ~

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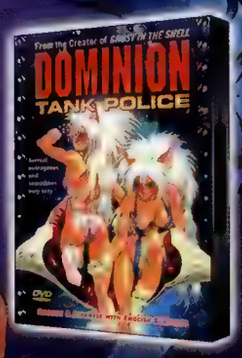


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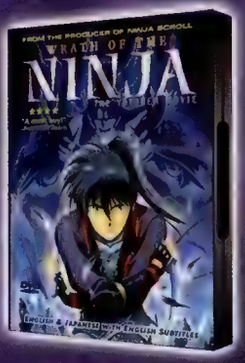
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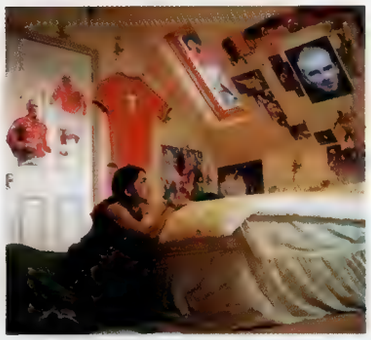
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Bend it Like Beckham
Lighthouse
Rated PG



Bend It Like Beckham is a sweet coming-of-age story that takes the rare approach of speaking genuinely to its audience instead of condescending with the typical fluff. It follows the lives of two teenage girls who love to play soccer and must deal with their misinformed families and friends as a result. When the movie moves through routine, the high-energy cast and warm conviction of its message pulls it to higher ground. There's even a little bite here where most fims would cop to safer, more feel-good ground. Set in England and brushed with ethnic flavor, shot with clever skill and just plain pleasant to watch, *Bend it Like Beckham* is a charmer. *-BF*
movie: B

The Good Thief
20th Century Fox
Rated R



A loose remake of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1954 French classic *Bob le Flambeur, The Good Thief* stars Nick Nolte as a drag-addled, emotionally scarred thief plotting his last major heist. The only thing Nolte's Bob loves more than his heroin high is the rush of the job, which this time involves a decoy casino gig fronting for the big prize—a room full of paintings. Bob isn't an awful man, just one of passion caught in awful circumstances. Nolte's performance is disturbingly convincing—rumors have it that he was doped out on the set—grounding the movie with an inescapable sadness, yet the heart of the character is played with a hope that sparks a liking for the beleaguered Bob. You want him to free himself from his past, caught in the colorful characters around him and their more masked levels of disfunction. Like many Neil Jordan films, *The Good Thief* ultimately stalls in the mechanical push of its plot, giving way to style and visual charge for its appeal. There aren't many fresh angles here to the caper flick, but you can't help but be drawn in to its eccentric, dusky world. *-BF*
movie: B-

Final Destination 2
New Line Home Entertainment
Rated R



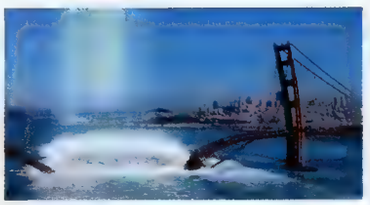
In true sequel form, *Final Destination 2* gives fans more of what they crave—over-the-top death, and lots of it. Not your run-of-the-mill beheadings, but drawn out gruesome passages into the hereafter, some guaranteed to make you cringe; others guaranteed to make you laugh, but all good. Two years have past since the events of the original film yet Death is still knocking on people's doors. Enter Kimberly Corman (played by the beautiful A.J. Cook) who has suddenly developed the power of premonition. On a road trip for spring break, she envisions a terrible car accident (terrible maybe, but kick ass none the less) allowing her to save lives—thus cheating death—and throwing a monkey wrench into the grim reapers to-do list. Aiding Kimberly on her quest to escape his ensuing wrath is Clear Rivers (played by the luscious Ali Larter), the sole survivor of the first movie. Together they try their best to save the few, the doomed, the survivors. Lucky for us, they fail miserably. *-TH*
movie: B-

Bowling For Columbine
MGM
Rated R



Critics went gaga for Michael Moore's *Bowling For Columbine*, leading some reviewers to go as far as calling the film "brilliant." Did I see the same movie? When this documentary delving into America's lust for violence and guns won the Oscar for the category last year, a couple much better efforts got the shaft, and after watching the film for the second time on video, I'm still as turned off by its manipulative attitude and diluted message. Written, directed and produced by a glib Michael Moore, *Bowling For Columbine* does have its moments of humor and tragic emotion, but it takes such a sensationalist approach to its presentation that it becomes the same tabloid brand of journalism Moore likes to admirably bash. It's also all over the map, reaching too far for some of its points and losing effect the more its carefully chosen talking heads get their screentime. Moore carries an air of antagonism, which is somewhat understandable given his subject matter, but he pokes and prods too obviously and shows a very selective side of the argument. There are indeed moments of truth in the film that cut deep, like when the Columbine tapes play to startling poignancy, and the scene nailing Charlton Heston to the wall for his casual argument for the right to bear arms is at the very least telling. Too bad Moore leaves the movie crashing when he dramatically places a picture of a shot six-year-old girl in front of his house. I expected funeral music to play next. *-BF*
movie: C

The Core
Paramount
Rated PG-13



The earth has stopped spinning, screwing up the electromagnetic fields and causing all kinds of fun death and destruction. Birds are falling from the sky. So is the space shuttle, landing in a Los Angeles drainage ditch. Pace makers are breaking. So was my tolerance the more this vacuous wreck of a film unleashed its continually building scenes of absurdity. At first it was a little fun to give in to the bombastic camp of it all; it's not often you get dialogue detailing how to hack the world and how to fly a ship to the core of the earth. Never mind the implausibility of it all, because the film creates one convenient invention after the other to push the inane plot along. I loved the scene where the wacky science guy just happened to invent not only the ship capable of withstanding the heat and pressure at the earth's core, but also the drill to open the hole. Capped off by dialogue so silly you just stop laughing it at after a while, this was one of the worst films last year. *-BF*
movie: D-



Bulletproof Monk
MGM
Rated PG-13



Sean William Scott in misplaced Dude mode and Chow yun-Fat badly misplaced, *Bulletproof Monk* takes more than an open mind to find any pleasures. The movie opens with Yun-Fat fighting to protect a scroll that freezes his aging. Transparent effects aside, it's the only bright spot in the movie, which degenerates the more we have to listen to the characters attempt to carry on some meaningful conversation about horror and destiny. When the setting moves from 1943 Tibet to modern-day sprawl, the scroll and its wisdom must be placed in the pickpocketing hands of unlikely disciple Kar (Sean William Scott). Monk With No Name of course warms to Kar after bonding through a couple clumsy fight scenes, and ll is good again in the world. For a movie based on comic book, you'd think there would be a little more spark than what we get with *Bulletproof Monk*. *-BF*
movie: C-



interview
Len Wiseman, Director

subject
Feature film Underworld
starring Kate Beckinsale

Underworld

words mike eisenberg

play: Tell us a bit about *Underworld*
Len Wiseman: Without giving too much away… *Underworld* tells the story of an ancient war between vampires and werewolves. It's also a very dark twist on Romeo and Juliet. Instead of the Montagues and the Capulets, you've got werewolves and vampires.

Was the Romeo and Juliet element intentional or did the similarities only become apparent later on?
It was part of the pitch from the beginning, but it was intended primarily to establish the state of war that existed between the two families [the werewolves and vampires] and how any relation between the two is forbidden, and to establish a class system between them. That was more of the Romeo and Juliet pitch rather than the love story itself, because our love story is very, very different from a classic Romeo and Juliet.

I get the feeling that the love story really takes a back seat to the action.
It does. Love-story-wise, *Underworld* is very similar to the first *Terminator*. When Selene, who is a vampire, and Michael, who is human, first meet, she completely manhandles him. She grabs him at one point and holds him up against a wall.

Judging from what we've seen so far, this definitely seems like Kate's most physical role to date. What type of preparation did she undergo?
This absolutely has been her most physical role so far. Kate underwent four weeks of strength training, wire work, fight choreography and weapons training.

I suppose this would be an appropriate time to offer our congratulations on your recent engagement to the lovely Kate Beckinsale.
Thank you very much.

Kate is also set to star in another vampire/werewolf movie called *Van Hellsing* later in 2004. Is there any concern that she might be typecast as "the vampire/werewolf movie actress"?
No, not at all. That's such a different kind of movie. The tone is completely different. In *Van Hellsing* she's human, in *Underworld* she's a vampire. Even though on the written page there might be similarities, insofar as both films have vampires and werewolves, when you see both films on the screen it will be very apparent that they are very different movies.

In addition to being the director, you're also one of *Underworld*'s writers. Can you talk a bit about how the story was developed?
Actually, I was never really interested in doing a werewolf or vampire movie, but then the studio approached me and asked what I would do with a werewolf movie. So it sort of just came out of left field, but it was an opportunity and I jumped at it. Initially, since the studio was looking for a werewolf movie, the story only involved werewolves, but then a friend of mine, Kevin Grevioux, came on board, who also plays Raze in the film, and we started talking about what would be different, what would be cool, and we were getting a little bit nervous that a straightforward werewolf movie would just have a B-movie quality to it and also we were looking for something that would be different. Then we started talking about who the werewolves would be fighting, and the idea of it just being the local sheriff seemed very uninteresting. We didn't want to see anything like that again. Then it hit us, why has nobody ever put werewolves and vampires in the same movie?

> "Instead of the Montagues and the Capulets, you've got werewolves and vampires."

Actually, in Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein, Dracula and the Wolfman had a few scenes together.

Okay, but aside from that.

Let's talk about werewolves for a minute. From a visual effects perspective, vampires seem pretty easy, but werewolves are a whole different ballgame. What can you tell us about the visual effects used to create the Lycans? Can we look forward to any cool transformations?
Yeah, it's really true. It's funny. We got together and talked about how we'd do the werewolves and the vampires. So we started off with the vampires. OK, we get some fake fangs, maybe some contacts and we're done. Then we turned to the werewolves and it was a complete nightmare, there was just so much involved with them. Yes, there are quite a few transformations in the film. In fact, except for maybe one or two other shots, the transformations are the only CG we used in the film. Everything else is these seven-foot-tall prosthetic suits with guys inside wearing stilts and with animatronic heads. They were just really complicated to work with, but I just really felt that I wanted to have practical creatures rather than just CGI. I think in the end it makes a big difference.

I understand that there area couple of different video games coming out in support of *Underworld*. What can you tell us about them?
That's right. One of them is an Xbox game simply called Underworld. The other one is a PC game. It's called Underworld: Bloodline. The Xbox game will be a regular game that will be available in stores, but the PC game is free. You can download it on the web.

Underworld: Bloodline for the PC is a Half-Life mod available now at: http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/Underworld/downloads.html. You will need a full version of Half-Life in order to play it.

Can you tell us who's making the Xbox game, and when will that be coming out?
The Xbox game is being made by a company called Lucky Chicken. I'm told that it will be out in time for the movie release in September.

Did any of the film's actors participate in the video game's development?
Yes, both Kate and Kevin [Grevioux] did voice work for the game. It was very important to me that they were involved. It's always bugged me that you can buy a game that supposedly features Bruce Willis, but then when you play it, it's not his voice. I wanted to make sure that if Selene was talking in the game, you got to actually hear Kate.

Do you have any other projects coming up that you can talk about?
Yes, Danny McBride, who did the screenplay for *Underworld*, and I have a project over at Disney called *Black Chapter*. I can't really say too much about it yet, but I like to describe the story as *The Sixth Sense* meets *La Femme Nikita*. It's the CIA using ethereal agents. I don't know whether or not I'm directing it yet.

That's sounds very intriguing. Thank you for taking some time to talk with us about *Underworld*. Hopefully we can speak again when *Black Chapter* is a bit farther along.
That would be great.

Capcomics Zone

Capcom and Dreamwave Unite

Part 2

words chris hoffman

As far as we gamers are concerned, Dreamwave's acquisition of Capcom properties to be transformed into comic-book form could be the best thing to happen to the medium since Todd McFarlane sent Al Simmons into hell. Indeed, that might sound a little hyperbolic, but with titles based on Mega Man, Devil May Cry, Maximo, Rival Schools and Darkstalkers coming in the approaching months, all featuring fantastic art and boasting creators who grew up bathed in Capcom mythos, we have reason after reason to be excited. Last issue we probed the minds of some of Dreamwave's creative team, and this time we're checking in with their collaborators to get the rest of the picture.

Capcom Versus Calendar

If you don't want to just read it and play it, soon you'll be able to hang it on your wall. The 2004 Capcom Versus Calendar, scheduled for release in October, will feature characters from all the Capcom comics, with original art by Pat Lee (Devil May Cry), Alan Wang (Maximo), Doe (Rival Schools), Lou Kang (Darkstalkers), Hyung-Tae Kim (the PC game War of Genesis III), Mark Brooks (Voltron), Ed McGuinness (Superman) and more.



Interview / Brad Mick
Devil May Cry writer

play: Congratulations on the success of Transformers. How did that project help prepare you for writing Devil May Cry?
Brad Mick: Transformers was a great feeling, because it was a book that everyone was sort of doubting initially. As a rabid Transformers fan, I knew what I wanted to see out of the book and I knew that DW had the goods to do it. It was a little daunting at first, because people were all like, "What the f*** is he doing?!" But once they saw where I was going, they really started to dig my shit. Which is terrific, you always want the fans to be happy. As far as DMC, TF helped Pat and I develop a better understanding of one another as creators, which should translate into something very special. Pat and I have some really big plans for this series, so trust me, this thing will rock!

Did you enjoy the DMC games? What did you like, and how will that be brought to the printed page?
Yeah, I'm a pretty big video game player and DMC was definitely one of my favorites. I love the action, loved the ambience and loved the characters. My only complaint was the lack of depth in the story. I was hoping for something a little more along the lines of Silent Hill or Symphony of the Night and got something more like "kill 15 of these" or "collect 10 of those," but still the gameplay was amazing. I want to bring that sort of intensity and rock-n-roll feel to the comics page. To be honest, I don't think there ever has been a comic that got that whole "Blade," "Matrix" vibe going to it, so that's what Pat and I are shooting for with this one. We're also both big into Korean and Japanese comics, so we'd like to capture that dynamic feel. You know...those moments where time stands still. There will be some very imaginative ways to kill or be killed in this one! The initial story that Pat and I are doing is based on the first game. I think it's the perfect vehicle to introduce the nongaming community to Dante, Trish and the whole crew. Like I said, my only complaint with the game was the loose story, so this gives us a chance to explore the characters and the concepts of the DMC universe and see what really makes them tick. Plus, it gives a chance to reveal the latter elements of the game to all the wusses who couldn't hang.

What kind of supporting characters are going to appear? What about that big, talking spider?
Oh, Phantom's definitely showing up and I'll make damn sure that punk gets his eight-legged ass squashed! Dude, I almost smashed my TV when I first fought him. Man, that f***er was hard! Cheatin'-ass bitch!

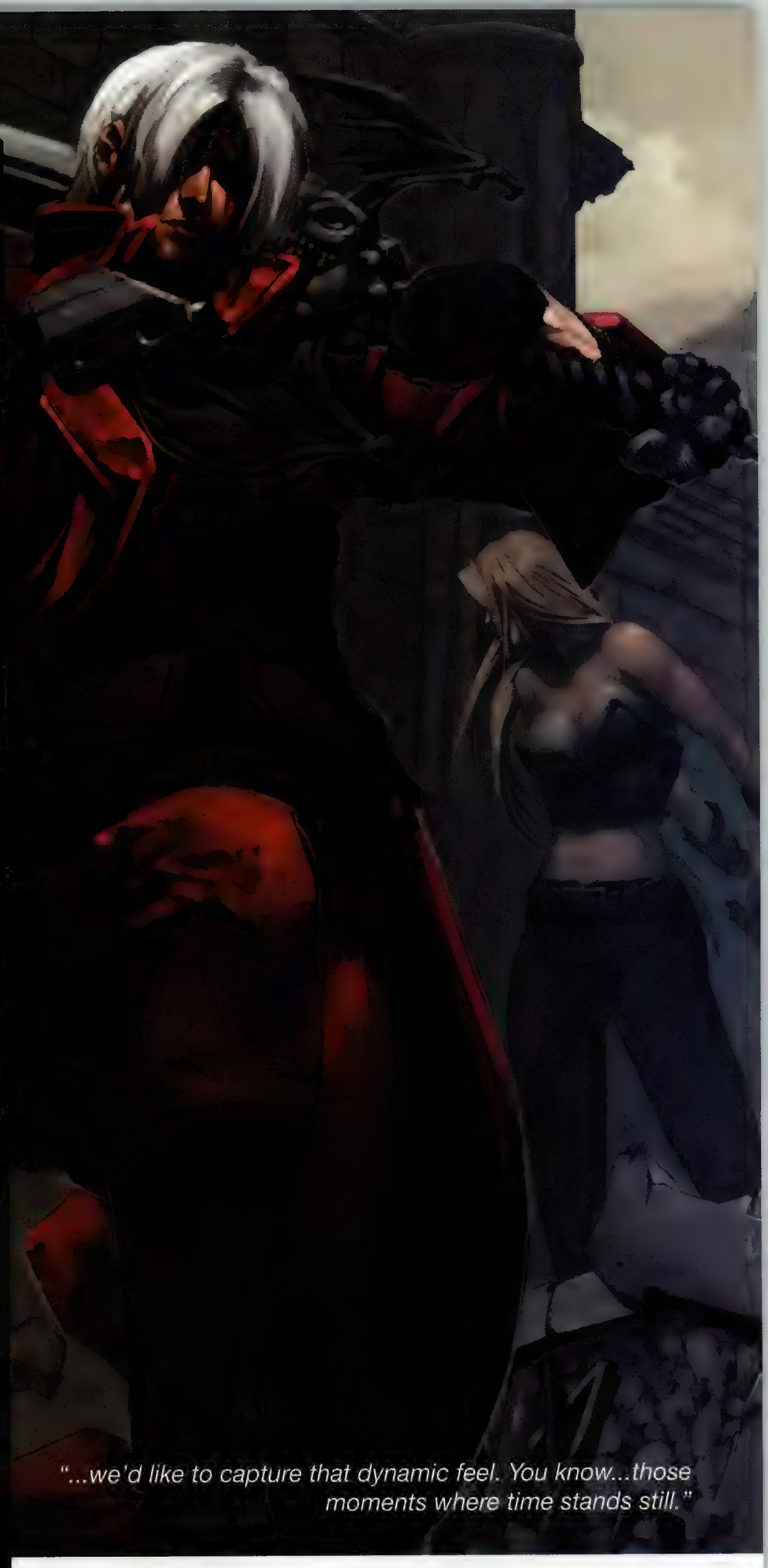
Do you think the comic might shed some light on what occurred between DMC1 and DMC2?
That's actually an idea that we're tossing around. I think if people really get into what we're doing, we'd like to do a lot more original adventures and in-between stories with Dante. He's just a cool motherf***er and we'd love to do more with him.

The DMC games both had Mature ratings...is this the same type of content we should expect in the comic?
I think so, but really we can already get away with murder in comics so it's not much of an issue. So, if you're expecting Dante to take it easy on the baddies, you may want to look elsewhere.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having DMC in a comic-book format as compared to the video game?
Well, there's the obvious ones such as motion, music, etc. But I think one of the advantages is that you can really savor the story with a comic and focus on the characters and their world instead of how many gems you need to earn for the next Alastor power-up.

Do the Capcom comics take place in a shared universe? Is there any chance of a crossover with other Capcom games or comics?
I wish. We wanted to keep things separate as not to confuse nongamers.

I asked Pat Lee last issue, so I need to ask you, too. Who's more your type: DMC1's Trish or DMC2's Lucia?
Come on, dude. I'd do them both in heartbeat.



"...we'd like to capture that dynamic feel. You know...those moments where time stands still."



"I love Mega Man very much and have played the game ever since the first release. My favorite...is Rockman Dash 2."

play: The Mega Man artwork we've seen so far has looked spectacular. How did you get started as an artist, and how did you get the position on Mega Man?
Michael Fong: First of all, thanks for your compliment. Well, I dreamt of being a comic book artist when I was very young. This childhood aspiration has indeed been a major part of the driving force that has brought me thus far in my comic career. And it's my luck to get a chance to meet Pat Lee, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get the position on Mega Man. He did make a tremendous impact in my career life.

What previous works have you done?
I'm now working on a series for a comic magazine in Hong Kong. My past works included a card game (Moz) and Masked Rider Kuuga, which are mostly Japanese-authorized comics. Lately, I'm drawing a [top-secret] comic series using sprites from a pop fighting game.

Who or what are the major influences on your art style?
I was heavily into Japanese comics in my early days. Masahiko Nakanira and Yoshizaki Mine are my favorite Japanese artists who influence me most in my art style.

Have you played the Mega Man games much?
Yeah. I love Mega Man very much and have played the game ever since the first release. However, I don't have the GBA or GameCube, so due to my heavy workload, I did not get into the Battle Network series. My favorite among the Mega Man series is Rockman Dash 2 [aka Mega Man Legends 2]. I have great affection for it because aside from the interesting character, there is, of course, always the great design of machines.

Any characters that you particularly like drawing, or are just personal favorites? Least favorites?
I particularly like drawing the fantastic leading character—Mega Man. And Tron Bonne of Rockman Dash 2 is my most desired character. Just like most of the fans, I am not bonded with Dr. Wily. The bad guys are always the least attractive characters.

What's been the biggest challenge in drawing Mega Man so far?
I have a great difficulty in production because the comic typesetting way of the USA is quite different from Japan's, which I'm used to using.

Is there anything you'd like to see Mega Man do in the comic book that he doesn't do in the video games?
I wish to see more fighting scenes without laser guns, but rather bare hands in the Mega Man comic series.

Have you ever seen the box art of the original U.S. Mega Man? What do you think?
I once saw it placed on the shelf of a U.S. Toys R Us. It's quite similar to the typical American style of drawing.

Is there anything you'd like to say to all the Mega Man fans?
Hey, this is Michael Fong, the comic artist of Mega Man. It's my pleasure to meet you. Sincerely I would hope that you do like the Mega Man comics and tell your friends about it. I will not let all the readers down and try my best to complete this comic. Thank you! <<



Jesper Kyd:

The Hit Man

words lucas mast

"Everyone seems to be after that John Williams-like sound. My goal is not to sound like John Williams—it is to have my own sound and to offer the gamer an interactive score that adds depth to the game."

You may have never heard the name Jesper Kid until now. But odds are, if you are a gamer, you have heard his music. The composer for such successful titles as *Hitman 1* and *2*, *Minority Report*, *MDK2* and *Brute Force* has been the a behind-the-scenes force in the music composition arena for years. But with the role of music shifting to play a more central role in the design of games, Kyd will surely become more recognizable—especially since his current projects include *Todd McFarlane's Evil Prophecy* (Konami) and *Freedom Fighters* (EA/IOI) and will likely be played by droves of gamers. **play** got Jesper to take a break from his frenzied schedule to chat about past, present and future endeavors.

With games becoming increasingly complex and lengthy, it is a rare breed that can compose a soundtrack that is engaging and adds value to the graphics and storyline. But Kyd is no newcomer to the scene, getting his teeth cut in the industry through work on the Sega platform. "People may be more familiar with some of the recent titles, but I have been working in this industry for a long time—and have been interested since I was a kid playing on a Commodore 64," muses Kyd. "There were some rocky times over the years, but creating music has been a passion that has sustained me through the years."

The consummate multiple-pronged talent threat, Kyd can add a number of indy film scores to his resume. Two recently completed projects, *Night All Day*, about Russian gangs living in LA, and *Death of a Saleswoman*, a comedy/detective movie, are both getting buzz in the various film circuits. "The process for getting your music in films is similar to that with games," contends Kyd. "You do your research and follow-up and make contacts and connections that you hope will pay off. Although I had three years of business school, I think I have learned more in the real world than I ever did in class—or maybe it's just that I intentionally forgot things," laughs Kyd.

So what does a seasoned veteran of the industry like Jesper think of the general state of affairs today? "In the early days, it was incredibly challenging to create a soundtrack since technology was so limited—but the work was of really good quality. We then jumped forward to CD-based music and people tended to get lazy and the quality was pretty uninspiring and lazy. Today you have two camps—one which is focused on licensed music like GTA Vice City that moves away from game composers, and the remaining composers like myself who have to compete with a Hollywood-like sound," asserts Kyd. "Everyone seems to be after that John Williams-like sound. My goal is not to sound like John Williams—it is to have my own sound and to offer the gamer an interactive score that adds depth to the game," contends Kyd.

So what does a musician's musician like Kyd listen to when he is not working on his own creations? "There are so many musicians doing interesting things today. Royksopp, Senor Coconut, the Future Sound of London, St. Germain, Scandinavian jazz and the lounge scene that has been developing around the world for some time now," offers Kyd. And as an electronic musician and composer who has toyed with almost every sub-genre of electronic music (drum n' bass, GOA, techno, breakbeat), it should come as no surprise that the aforementioned artists catch his ear. "I would also consider Vangelis, Danny Elfman, and classical musicians like Stravinksy as major influences on my work," states Kyd.

On the back burner for now while he completes his major projects is Decibel, the electronic music duo he is in with Jun Mizumachi. "I'd love to eventually put out a music CD, but I have been so swamped working on games—which is a god thing," laughs Kyd. Currently recording another symphony score for an undisclosed project, Jesper Kyd shows no signs of slowing down. And in this economy, having too much work is a blessing—and with his continued successes it will not be long before you see Kyd's name in lights.

music reviews



Tom Findlay and Tim "Love" Lee
Sounds Good In the Nude
(Shadow Records)

What happens when you get Groove Armada's Findlay and Tummy Touch Records honcho Lee together on an album? Some sort of radical combination between chaos and bliss, which results in a wonderful aural treat rarely heard together in a single release. While the title properly indicates that something nefarious yet seductive is afoot, the track selection is impressive, showcasing many original tracks by Lee, as well as the groundbreaking "World of a Thousand Suns" by Chungking. Put both discs of this double-CD treat into your carousel and have a good time! *-Lucas Mast*

Various Artists
Across 155th Street The Soundtrack
(Melee Entertainment)

This is the companion soundtrack to the long-standing summer duel in Harlem's famed Rucker Park between NBA ballers and street-ballers. With carefully selected of predominately b-ball themed joints from rap superstars Fat Joe, Talib Kweli, Dead Prez and Mobb Deep, the album will definitely satisfy hip-hop aficionados. A bonus is the exposure to lesser-known or up-and-coming talents of soon-to-be superstars Jean Grae, Nazaruz, and Moe Manson. *-Lucas Mast*

Mark Farina
Air Farina
(Om Records)

Arguably the man who helped to define house music in the U.S., Mark Farina drops one of the most anticipated artist albums of the year. With a retro yet hip airline theme running through the album of original tracks, supplemented with appearances by labelmates Kaskade and People Under the Stairs, Farina is sure to please fans and win new ones with his ahead-of-the-curve style and pizzazz. All aboard Air Farina—this is a flight you don't want to miss! *-Lucas Mast*

Josh Wink
Profound Sounds Vol. 2
(Ovum/System Recordings)

The second installment from Philly's Josh Wink continues the variety and depth for which Wink is known. From his original tracks "Oakish" and "Superfreak," which are likely to be club favorites, to tracks from veterans (Frankie Bones) and exciting newcomers (Rithma) alike, Wink's production, remixing, and track selection are second to few. Throw in a bonus CD with some of his classic tracks, and the album is a necessary addition to the complete collection for rocking the night away. *-Lucas Mast*

Multiformat DVD recorder

Sony RDR-GX7

www.sony.com
$799

Though they are all above the magic $200 barrier for mass acceptance, DVD recorder prices are coming down as their capabilities are going up, and Sony's maiden effort is a real stunner. The RDR-GX7's greatest claim to fame is its ability to record onto several different DVD formats, including DVD-R, -RW, and +RW. Though it lacks the chasing playback of DVD-RAM recorders, its ability to make discs that are compatible with standard DVD players is a real bonus. In addition, the system, which records and plays back in progressive scan mode (HDTV required for full effect), can convert S-Video signals to progressive scan. In other words, PS2 players with Hi-Def televisions can achieve an almost progressive quality image if they run their system through the recorder. This is wonderful, as most PS2 games do not support progressive scan. Rounding out its strengths, the RDR-GX7 is very well built and designed with terrific image quality, befitting of an upper-mid level Sony product. *–MH*



From Japan

SONY QUALIA



Just released in Japan, Sony's new Qualia line applies a strong design theme to common items. Shown are its floor-sitting Hi-Def monitor, angled to facilitate perfect viewing from a seated position and its modular gum-packet sized digital camera. Neither coming here.

Home Theatre in a box

Samsung HT-SK6

With so many different DVD players, receivers and speakers out there, setting up a home theatre system can be rather intimidating. For people who want to get a high-end system without all the fuss, look no further than Samsung's latest Home Theater in A Box, the HT-SK6. The HT-SK6 features a Samsung single-disc DVD progressive scan player with a built-in 5.1 channel amplifier that cranks out 725 watts of total power. In addition to normal DVDs, the player is capable of CD, VCD, MP3-CD and CD-R/CD-RW playback. The receiver is capable of Dolby Digital, Dolby Pro-Logic II and DTS decoding. Brilliant sound comes from the world's smallest horn-loaded 5.1 Klipsch speakers, which stand at just 7.5 inches high. We especially liked the slim silver finished design and the cool blue glow that came from the unit when it was turned on. Perfect for the electronically challenged, the HT-SK6 sets up in a snap with its on-screen menu and a single remote control that handles everything. And for the price, you really can't beat it.

www.samsung.com
$1199



GeForce FX 5900 Ultra

We all know that NVIDIA dropped the ball with their GeForce FX 5800 Ultra (NV30) card. Not only was it incredible loud, it was late to hit the market and performance was inferior to other cards, namely the ATI Radeon 9800 Pro. Answering pleas from hardcore gamers, NVIDIA has now released the successor to the FX 5800 Ultra, the FX 5900 Ultra. Doubling the memory interface from 128-bit to 256-bit and also the onboard memory from 128MB to 256MB, the performance is noticeably faster. Utilizing new texture-compression and the latest Detonator drivers (v. 44.03), the GeForce FX 5900 Ultra is virtually equal with ATI's new 256MB 9800 Pro, however, at higher resolutions (1600X1200), the new Radeon couldn't touch the 3D performance of the FX 5900 Ultra. Whether we were playing Star Wars Galaxies or Call of Duty, the FX 5900 Ultra performed flawlessly—at the highest possible resolutions. If you're looking for the best card for you gaming rig, look no further than the FX 5900 Ultra.



www.nvidia.com
$499



Pioneer CDJ-1000mk2

www.pioneerprodj.com
$1299

When it was first released earlier this year, the CDJ-1000 quickly found its place in the hottest clubs around the world. Not only did it perform like a real turntable, the sound and memory features alone made an invaluable tool for recording as well as playing. Not only could DJs scratch just like vinyl, all of the cool transform and overlapping effects were also possible with the CDJ-1000. Although the new 1000MK2 looks the same on the outside as the CDJ-1000, but with increased sound quality, a smoother job dial and faster response means better DJing and tighter mixes. New features include delay-free scratching, a cue marker, wide pitch control, full-feature digital out and a brighter display. Another key feature is the seamless loop in and out adjust function. This allows users to integrate voice samples, riffs—whatever they want at the touch of a button. The BPM counter is also a nice feature. Although the price point is a bit high, if it can make you sound like pro, isn't it worth it?





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